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3 FEB 2026

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Harassment:  
A Penang State-level  
Prevalence Study

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# Mapping Online Harassment: A Penang State-level Prevalence Study

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While online spaces and digital life have become almost inseparable to modern global society, this rapid digital expansion also results in an increasing risk of online harms that can cause significant psychological, social, and economic consequences.
- Online harassment is a critical issue in Penang; the survey data reveals that nearly half of the respondents had been affected, with 62% of young female survivors enduring abuse as adolescents (17 years and younger).
- Young women are disproportionately targeted with sexualised forms of abuse such as cyber-flashing and grooming/catfishing. In contrast, young men face more technical or aggressive harassment, with account hacking and cyberbullying being the main forms of abuse.
- The harassment endured mostly leads to self-censorship (49.1% of young women thought twice before posting) and emotional consequences, including anger (51.9%) and an inability to trust others (43.5%), with these emotions present within both genders.
- Systemic barriers to justice and recovery are evident. The majority of younger survivors (57.4% of women, 63.9% of men) opted not to report the incident. Those who do, tended towards platform administrators rather than official authorities, indicating a lack of awareness and trust.
- The study also found that support mechanisms are seen to be fragmented, and there is low awareness of formal support systems. A multi-stakeholder taskforce is necessary to combat online harassment in Penang.

## Table of Contents

1	Introduction .....	3
2	Defining online harassment .....	3
3	Prevalence of online harassment against women.....	4
3.1	Why women face greater risks of online harassment .....	5
3.2	The effects of online harassment .....	7
4	Current legal provisions on addressing online harassment in Malaysia .....	8
5	Methodology .....	9
5.1	Study design.....	9
5.2	Population and Sampling .....	10
5.3	Data Collection Procedures.....	11
5.4	Data Management and Analysis .....	11
5.5	Ethical Considerations .....	11
6	Analysis of the survey .....	12
6.1	Social media usage.....	13
6.2	Encountering online harassment .....	13
6.3	Types of online harassment encountered .....	15
6.4	Length of harassment encountered .....	17
6.5	Platform of harassment .....	18
6.6	Identity of harassers .....	19
6.7	Emotional consequences of online harassment.....	21
6.8	Other impacts of online harassment.....	22
6.9	Responding to online harassment .....	24
6.10	Reporting outcomes .....	25
7	Bringing it Together: Summary of Findings.....	29
8	Moving forward .....	30
	Limitations of the Study.....	31
	References .....	32
	Appendix A .....	35

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, online spaces have become increasingly integral to daily life globally. They play a vital role in connecting people across the world, and help to shape how people connect socially, and how they learn and work. Beyond this, online spaces have increasingly reshaped social dynamics, influenced economic structures, and even redefined individual and collective identities, deeply entrenching them in the fabric of modern society.

Yet, the rapid expansion of the World Wide Web and digital platforms also comes with the increasing risk of various forms of online harm – such as cybercrimes (scams, financial fraud, identity theft), misinformation (fake news, deep fakes), cyberbullying and online sexual harassment. Individuals who have been subjected to these forms of harm may suffer psychological, social, and economic consequences that may lead to loss of self-esteem, to anxiety, isolation and eroding trust in both digital and physical spaces.

This report begins by defining online harassment (also known as technology-facilitated gender-based violence, TFGBV) as used in this study. It then outlines headline prevalence and briefly reviews why women face heightened risks online. Subsequent sections summarise documented effects on wellbeing and participation and provide an overview of the relevant legal provisions in Malaysia. The core of the report presents the survey findings and data analysis, covering forms of harassment, platforms, perpetrators, duration, impacts, and help-seeking. These findings will be utilized in a multi-stakeholder roundtable, which will convene to establish a taskforce responsible for translating them into coordinated, survivor-centred actions, to be published separately.

## Objectives

Despite Penang having a high penetration of internet users, the data and evidence on online harassment in general are limited and rarely disaggregated by age and sex. Reporting pathways and procedures are not well understood, and awareness of the formal channels available for support remains low. Hence, a Penang-specific empirical baseline is essential to provide insights into the prevalence of harassment, in addition to establishing the patterns of abuse. This will help to improve coordination and strengthen access to support and remedies.

Therefore, this study aims to address four core objectives:

1. Establish Penang's online harassment prevalence by sex and age group and trajectories of the harassment;
2. Identify the forms of harassment, the platforms/channels and contexts in which they occur, and the relationships of perpetrators to survivors;
3. Assess effects on wellbeing and participation, and map the pervasiveness of survivors seeking help and support; and
4. Supply the evidence required to set priorities for a multi-stakeholder taskforce to combat online harassment.

## 2 Defining online harassment

Among the various forms of digital harm listed above, online harassment is a growing area of concern that requires more attention, discourse and discussion from the government and society as a whole. Online harassment is generally defined as any act of violence including those where are sexual in nature, and conducted and committed fully or in part by the use of digital devices and technology,

such as mobile phones, smartphones and the internet (which includes emails, social media platforms, social networking sites and gaming platforms). <sup>1</sup> Table 1 outlines types of online sexual violence:

Table 1: Types of online harassment by definition

Type of harassment	Description/definition
Account hacked and/or controlled	Intercepting online communications and data, and may involve stealing information and passwords, including the use of Remote Access Tools (RATs) to spy on a digital device from afar
Cyberbullying and/or harassment	The act of frightening, undermining and threatening an individual's self-esteem or reputation by using textual or graphical content, over a specific period of time
Cyber flashing	The unsolicited and unconsented transmission of sexually explicit content such as nude photos to another individual through social media apps or text messages
Cyber stalking	Tracking another individual through social media or GPS with the intent to intimidate, threaten and/or control
Catfishing	Creating a fake online identity or persona using false photos and made-up information to trick, deceive, or manipulate another individual
Online grooming	Establishing an online relationship with a young and/or vulnerable individual by an adult perpetrator, with the intent of committing sexual abuse or exploitation
Impersonation	Wrongfully obtaining another individual's personal data and/or media in ways that involve fraud or deception
Misinformation and defamation	Spreading fake or exaggerated news by creating rumours and falsehoods through the internet that aim to discredit or harm an individual
Non-consensual image sharing	The sharing and distribution of sexually explicit images and/or videos of another individual without their consent
Threats of physical/sexual violence	Online threats of violence, including rape threats, injury or death threats etc., directed at an individual with the intent to incite fear

Sources: Economic Intelligence Unit (2021), Marganski & Melander (2021), Fraser & Martineau-Searle (2018).

### 3 Prevalence of online harassment against women

Rapid technological change continues to create new risks with regard to violence against women and girls. Perpetrators are increasingly using digital tools and platforms to carry out gender-based abuse, including harassment, hate speech, control, and violence. As with physical abuse, research has also shown that online sexual violence and harassment have disproportionately affected women and girls, who are often targeted because of their sex and gender identity. Although it is acknowledged that men are not exempt from online hate, the forms of harassment they encounter are usually along the lines of name-calling and physical threats, and less so of a sexual nature.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2021). Methodology: Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women, retrieved from <https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Nadim, M., & Fladmoe, A. (2019). Silencing Women? Gender and Online Harassment. Social Science Computer Review, 39(2), 245-258.

As such, textual analysis and studies of online content found that women substantially suffered more online hate and abuse when compared against men. This disparity was illustrated in an experiment using fake usernames in a chatroom. It was observed that female-sounding usernames received an average of 100 messages daily, where those messages were constantly threatening and/or sexually explicit in tone. In contrast, male-sounding usernames only received an average of 3.5 messages of the same nature.<sup>3</sup>

Compiling data from a range of studies, UN Women found the prevalence of technology-facilitated violence against women and girls ranged from 16% to 58%, with younger women being more affected.<sup>4</sup> This finding is further supported by other research. For instance, EIU's study, conducted in 2021, reported that 38% of the study's respondents had experienced online sexual violence, with an additional 85% conveying that they had seen violence perpetuated against other women.<sup>5</sup>

PLAN International's report observed that 58% of 14,071 respondents have experienced online harassment, with the majority of them stating that the harassment had started when they were in their early teens.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Amnesty International's research on the trends of Twitter and its toxic environment against women found that approximately 23% women (across a sample of 4,009 respondents across eight countries) had experienced abuse and harassment of a sexual nature on the platform.<sup>7</sup> Closer to home, a survey conducted by PeopleACT (as part of the Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights (MCCHR)) discovered that among the respondents, women were at least two times more likely than men to encounter online sexual harassment.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, women also experienced a higher percentage of online death/rape threats (4.8% vs 3.3%) and stalking (16.4% vs. 13.1%).

The evidence and statistics above raises a critical concern: the rise of online sexual harassment faced by women and girls reinforces the discriminatory and misogynistic norms that continually intensify the violence faced by women and girls. Furthermore, it also risks normalising the existing cultures of patriarchal and misogynistic violence, and potentially paves the way for newer forms of harassment to emerge.

### **3.1 Why women face greater risks of online harassment**

Why are women disproportionately impacted by online harassment, especially that of a sexual nature? Violence against women in the digital world can be construed as an extension of violence against women in the physical world. Patriarchal societies expect women to be passive or subordinate, and seek to confine them to domestic roles and often try to limit their voices and visibility, especially in public spaces.

When women challenge these unequal norms by asserting by making their voices heard, they are frequently met with derision or subjected to remarks designed to “put them in their rightful place”, in

<sup>3</sup> Jane E. A. (2014). “Your a ugly, whorish, slut”. *Feminist Media Studies*, 14, 531–546.

<sup>4</sup> UN Women. (2024). Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls: Report of the Secretary-General, retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/a-79-500-sg-report-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-2024-en.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2021). Methodology: Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women, retrieved from <https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/>

<sup>6</sup> PLAN International. (2023). Free to be Online? Girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment, retrieved from <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/06/SOTWGR2020-CommsReport-edition2023-EN.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International's on the trends of Twitter and toxicity against women found that approximately 23% women (across a sample of 4009 respondents across eight countries) had experienced abuse and harassment of a sexual nature in the platform.

<sup>8</sup> Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights (MCCHR). (2018). Cyberharassment in Malaysia: What do we see happening?, retrieved from <https://mcchr.org/2018/01/31/cyberharassment-in-malaysia-what-do-we-see-happening/>

the attempt to enforce traditional hierarchies.<sup>9</sup> Persistent gender inequalities and societal patriarchal norms, which have consistently been entrenched in the offline world, reinforce much of the abuse experienced by women in digital spaces.

Outspoken women, such as politicians, activists and journalists, face even higher levels of online abuse. Their passion and authority in speaking out on issues that challenge gender norms and societal expectations of women often result in backlash and criticism from opposing groups that feel challenged by their influence. For example, in 2019, Malaysian women activists were subjected to cyberbullying, doxing and threats after speaking up on gender and minority rights during an International Women's Day March.<sup>10</sup> Politicians Lim Yi Wei and Jamaliah Jamaluddin, known for their vocal stance on social issues, received death and rape threats on Facebook.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, schoolgirl Ain Husniza Saiful Nizam encountered online harassment, rape threats and was criticised for being “too sensitive” after she raised the issue of sexual harassment faced by girls in school.<sup>12</sup> Such abuse and harassment are intended to intimidate and silence women and girls and reduce their presence in online spaces.

The online sexual harassment encountered by women are extensions of the systemic gender discrimination and power imbalances that mirror women's experiences in reality.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it has been termed by some scholars as “the same old behaviour in new disguises”.<sup>14</sup> The shield of anonymity and the reach of the digital world have further exacerbated the harassment that women suffer. The obscurity of identities acts to embolden the harassers, particularly when they are not subjected to any consequences; anonymity is seen to reduce the possibility of detection and of subsequent punishment. Anonymity also enables perpetrators to behave more aggressively or inappropriately than they would in the offline world, heightening a sense of power and impunity.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the portrayal of women in society and traditional mainstream media often subjects them to further unwelcome sexual scrutiny. From movies to advertisements to everyday social media content, the looks and bodies of women are often scrutinised. More often than not, they are judged for the way they look, and criticised if they do not conform to societal ideals. This results in harmful behaviours that objectify women – often in a sexualised manner – and acts to reduce their sense of agency.

Over time, this normalisation has bled into online spaces, where harassment towards women takes place in the form of sexual jokes, sexually degrading insults and unsolicited explicit messages.<sup>16</sup> In the case of non-consensual intimate sharing, women are more likely to be victimised, and tend to

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<sup>9</sup> Perry, B. (2001). In the name of hate: Understanding hate crimes, cited in Nadim, M., & Fladmoe, A. (2019). Silencing Women? Gender and Online Harassment. *Social Science Computer Review*, 39(2), 245–258.

<sup>10</sup> Chua, C.T. (2024). Malaysian Women in a Digital Fight for Rights, retrieved from <https://ova.galencentre.org/malaysian-women-in-a-digital-fight-for-rights/>

<sup>11</sup> Soo, W.J. (2020). Govt must step up and stamp out online sexual harassment in Malaysia now, say Pakatan reps, retrieved from <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/05/27/govt-must-step-up-and-stamp-out-online-sexual-harassment-in-malaysia-now-sa/1870028>

<sup>12</sup> Chua, C.T. (2024). Malaysian Women in a Digital Fight for Rights, retrieved from <https://ova.galencentre.org/malaysian-women-in-a-digital-fight-for-rights/>

<sup>13</sup> Jane, E. A. (2020). Online Abuse and Harassment. *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, 1–16.

<sup>14</sup> Marganski, A. J., & Melander, L. A. (2021). Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls in public and private spheres: Moving from enemy to ally. In *The Emerald international handbook of technology-facilitated violence and abuse* (pp. 623–641). Emerald Publishing Limited.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, M., Ellithorpe, M., & Burt, S. A. (2023). Anonymity and its role in digital aggression: A systematic review. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 72, 101856.

<sup>16</sup> Jane E. A. (2014). “Your a ugly, whorish, slut”. *Feminist Media Studies*, 14, 531–546.

suffer more severe consequences from the act. A report by the UK Revenge Porn helpline in 2023 found that women were 28 times more likely to have their images shared without their consent.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the latest shifts, such as AI-powered image generation and deepfake technology, enable the creation of fake sexual images and videos, frequently targeting women without their knowledge or consent. The circulation of deepfake pornography online predominantly features women, reflecting the gender disparity of these violations.<sup>18</sup>

This, in turn, allows algorithms on social media and digital spaces to further exacerbate the problem by promoting sexist and harmful views of women. Exposure to this type of objectifying media has been shown to increase the tendency of men to engage in sexual harassment and coercive behaviours. Furthermore, the harmful stereotypes serve to trivialise the online violence against women, and perpetuate the culture of victim blaming, shifting the responsibility away from the abusers.<sup>19</sup> The speed and the reach of digital spaces only serve to further enable the perpetrators.

### **3.2 The effects of online harassment**

While attitudes surrounding online harassment are often dismissive, with the acts being cited as “just words” or “harmless online behaviour” due to the lack of physically visible or palpable consequences, online harassment actually causes serious harm to victims, which extend far beyond the digital realm. The harms inflicted can be psychological, social and even economic in nature.

Firstly, online harassment has a detrimental impact on the victim’s psychosocial wellbeing and mental health outcomes, potentially causing depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and even suicidal ideation in more severe cases.<sup>20</sup> It also leads to feelings of shame and lack of self-worth – one of the reasons why survivors choose not to report the harassment they suffered. Beyond psychological harm, online harassment also risks manifesting detrimental physical effects such as insomnia, loss of appetite, increased levels of stress and other health-related issues. It may also result in alcohol and drug abuse in some cases, leading to long-term consequences on physical health and wellbeing.<sup>21</sup>

These impacts are found to be gendered in nature, with women experiencing greater harm and harsher judgement when compared to men. As women are more frequently judged based on their appearances and on how they behave and carry themselves, they are more often subjected to the culture of victim blaming – accused of provoking the abuse or of having “brought it upon themselves”.<sup>22</sup> This acts to shift the responsibility away from the perpetrators, burdening the survivors and intensifying the emotional distress they experienced. Survivors also reported the fear of the online abuse escalating into real-life physical abuse, a sentiment mostly expressed by women, especially those who have experienced cyberstalking or intimate image abuse, as they are often found to suffer greater harm.<sup>23</sup> Women are also more likely to harbour fears of personal injury from the escalation of online violence.

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<sup>17</sup> Papachristou, K (2024). Revenge Porn Helpline: 2023 Annual Report, retrieved from <https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/assets/documents/revenge-porn-helpline-report-2023.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Chesney, B., & Citron, D. (2019). Deep fakes: A looming challenge for privacy, democracy, and national security. *Calif. L. Rev.*, 107, 1753.

<sup>19</sup> Galdi, S., & Guizzo, F. (2021). Media-induced sexual harassment: The routes from sexually objectifying media to sexual harassment. *Sex Roles*, 84(11), 645-669.

<sup>20</sup> Champion, A. R., Oswald, F., Khera, D., & Pedersen, C. L. (2022). Examining the gendered impacts of technology-facilitated sexual violence: A mixed methods approach. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 51(3), 1607-1624.

<sup>21</sup> Said, I., & McNealey, R. L. (2022). Nonconsensual Distribution of Intimate Images: Exploring the Role of Legal Attitudes in Victimization and Perpetration. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 38(7-8), 5430.

<sup>22</sup> Henry, N., & Powell, A. (2018). Technology-facilitated sexual violence: A literature review of empirical research. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 19(2), 195–208.

<sup>23</sup> Vitak, J., Chadha, K., Steiner, L., & Ashktorab, Z. (2017, February). Identifying women's experiences with and strategies for mitigating negative effects of online harassment. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (pp. 1231-1245).

Furthermore, online harassment potentially results in the damaging of reputations and in some cases, the loss of employment. This is especially relevant with victims of non-consensual intimate image sharing, where the victims had their employment terminated due to the unauthorised circulation of their private photos.<sup>24</sup> This also has far-reaching consequences for future job opportunities, as victims may face hurdles in securing new employment, leading to significant economic losses.

Online harassment also leads to the withdrawal of victims from the digital space. Some survivors reported disconnecting from all social media platforms in a bid to stop the harassment they faced. Self-censorship also presents a problem, as it limits open engagement and public discourse. This can act to further widen the global gender digital divide, which is already imbalanced towards women to begin with.<sup>25</sup> Women are already facing greater barriers to digital technology access. When the online space becomes unsafe because of online harassment, women are discouraged from participation, deepening the existing inequalities.

Beyond the digital space, online harassment can also result in withdrawal from the physical world. Fear of potential physical harm and a loss of trust can manifest as self-isolation, causing survivors to withdraw from their relationships with family and close friends. This social withdrawal further intensifies feelings of depression and despair; survivors are left without the emotional support they need for their recovery. Mental wellbeing is then further compromised, making recovery even more difficult.

Taken together, these varied consequences highlight online sexual harassment as a critical issue that needs urgent attention. It is vital that perpetrators are held accountable and that survivors are given strong protection and support.

#### **4 Current legal provisions on addressing online harassment in Malaysia**

The current legal framework in Malaysia offers some avenues for addressing online harassment, though it is still perceived as inadequate and fragmented in several ways. There are laws, acts and penal codes that touch on online abuse, but online sexual violence has not been directly addressed.<sup>26</sup>

Currently, the **Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA)** is most directly relevant to address online abuse. **Section 211** acts against the "improper use of network facilities or network service", and **Section 233** serves to criminalise the use of digital services to "annoy, abuse, threaten or harass" others, and these provisions have been used to address cases involving online harassment. However, they do not differentiate between sexual and non-sexual forms of harassment – and the broad definitions have been criticised for being too vague.

There are also several sections in the **Penal Code** that addresses online sexual harassment. **Sections 292 and 293** acts against the sale, distribution, circulation etc. of any forms of obscene material (including to underage individuals). **Sections 503, 506 and 507** can be invoked when there are threats made by an individual to another individual intending injury to the person's reputation or property, with the intention to harm, and this includes anonymous communication. Similar to sections in CMA, these provisions do not explicitly address the digital context.

**The Child Act 2001 and the Child (Amendment) Act 2016** act as Malaysia's foundational laws for the protection, care, and rehabilitation of children. However, the framework is broad and does not

<sup>24</sup> Jane, E. A. (2020). Online Abuse and Harassment. The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication, 1-16.

<sup>25</sup> Arimatsu, L. (2019). Silencing women in the digital age. Cambridge International Law Journal, 8(2), 187-217.

<sup>26</sup> Women's Centre for Change. (n.d.) Laws Related to Online Violence in Malaysia, retrieved from <https://www.wccpenang.org/online-violence-laws-in-malaysia/>

contain definitions and provisions for digital and technological offenses. The application to online abuse bases more on interpretation and the extension of its general principles, for example, if online harassment or abuse causes distress to a child, or if sexual abuse occurs through online grooming.

The **Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017 (SOAC)** is enacted to further combat sexual offenses against children, as it explicitly recognises abuse committed through digital and online means. **Sections 5 to 9** cover the making, direction, production, distribution and sale of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), including those created and shared digitally. Additionally, **Sections 11 to 13** specifically addresses sexual communication with a child and child grooming, with provisions that cover communication and grooming taking place in online platforms.

The **Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022**, gazetted in October 2022, offers a formal definition of sexual harassment, and provides a right of redress for any individual that has suffered sexual harassment. A Tribunal for Anti-Sexual Harassment has been established to address the survivor's rights to legal provision. However, the Act does not outwardly mention online sexual harassment and its specific forms, and hence, its applicability to sexual harassment in digital spaces is subjected to interpretation.

Evidently, laws and provisions that specifically address online sexual harassment and defines it as a criminal offence are still necessary. Additionally, the existing laws do not impose responsibilities on digital platforms to address or prevent online harassment. Combating anonymous harassment remains a significant problem as current laws do not provide redress. This results in the perpetrators continuing their attacks and leaving victims vulnerable and without proper recourse.

As such, the issue of online harassment is undoubtedly one that should be given closer attention. Globally, feminist scholars and activists often advocate for the collection of more robust data, stronger and clearer definitions and stricter laws in prosecution, to address this issue more effectively. In Malaysia, the contextual understanding and the availability of data on online harassment are still notably limited, with the gaps being even more pronounced in Penang. As such, there is an obvious need for more research looking into the prevalence of online harassment in Malaysia, especially that perpetuated against women and young people.

## 5 Methodology

### 5.1 Study design

The study used a cross-sectional quantitative research approach, characterised by the systematic collection of numerical data and statistical analysis. The approach was selected to identify types of harassment occurring, and knowledge on available reporting mechanisms, as well as to gain a better understanding of the prevalence of online violence through empirical measurement<sup>27</sup>.

The cross-sectional survey design was selected to efficiently collect data from a large sample of the target population. This design is well-suited for estimating the frequency of a particular phenomenon within a defined population. It is important to acknowledge that while cross-sectional studies are effective for determining prevalence at a specific moment, it cannot establish cause-and-effect

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<sup>27</sup> Anahita, G. (2023). An Overview of Quantitative Research Methods. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 6(8).

relationships or track changes in prevalence over time<sup>28</sup>. This means the study can answer “what is the prevalence now?” but is limited in addressing “why is it happening?” or “how has it changed?”.

## 5.2 Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of all residents of Penang State aged 18 years and above. This broad definition was chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of online sexual violence experiences across the adult demographic, especially youths within the specified geographical area<sup>29</sup>.

The Simple Random Sampling (SRS) method was used to select respondents. SRS is a probability sampling technique. Therefore, using this approach, individuals within the population with internet access had an equal and independent opportunity to participate in the survey<sup>30</sup>. The participation was largely mechanical, minimising human interference and potential bias. Although the study aimed to employ SRS, the actual implementation relied on random dissemination via social media and messaging platforms, rather than a selection from a complete sampling frame of all adult Penang residents. Consequently, while steps were taken to reduce bias, the sample more accurately represents adults with internet access rather than the entire adult population of Penang.

## Instrumentation

This study used a self-completion questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire was adapted from a study conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2021, which was restructured for relevance and cultural appropriateness within the Malaysian context.<sup>31</sup> It is curated to gather quantitative data on the demographic characteristics of respondents, their experiences with various forms of online violence, and awareness of the reporting mechanism and available support systems.

Importance was given to the structuring and wording of the questionnaire to minimise respondent distress due to the highly sensitive nature of online harassment especially those considered sexual in nature, and to maximise the quality and accuracy of the data collected. Each question was structured to be clear, concise, and focused on a single piece of information. Neutral language was used to generate unbiased answers. This approach is essential for sensitive topics where respondents may feel compelled to provide responses that they perceive as acceptable rather than truthful.<sup>32</sup>

The sensitive questions were placed after a series of demographic questions, allowing participants to become comfortable with the survey format before being asked to disclose potentially distressing information. The instrument also included clear introductory statements designed to reassure respondents about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

A pilot test was conducted as an ethical safeguard. A total of 100 respondents aged 18 years and above participated. The questionnaire was administered online; however, the survey link was disseminated through face-to-face engagement with a targeted group of participants.

This served as a methodological refinement, and most importantly, helped identify if any questions caused significant distress to respondents, before the widespread deployment of the survey<sup>33</sup>. Feedback gathered during the pilot was instrumental in refining the questionnaire, ensuring cultural

<sup>28</sup> Slater, P. & Hasson, F. (2025). Quantitative Research Designs, Hierarchy of Evidence and Validity. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 32(3).

<sup>29</sup> Hortash Institute. (n.d.). How to Write Chapter 3 of a Quantitative Thesis? Retrieved from <https://spublishers.com/eng/how-to-write-chapter-3-in-thesis/>

<sup>30</sup> Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>31</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2021). Methodology: Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women, retrieved from <https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/>

<sup>32</sup> Sullivan, G. & Artino, A. (2017). How to Create a Bad Survey Instrument, *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 9, 411-415.

<sup>33</sup> Ogbeide, S.A. (2009). Ethical Issues in Survey Research. *The International Honor Society in Psychology*, 14(1), retrieved from <https://www.psichi.org/page/141EYEFall09eOgbeidt>

appropriateness, ease of understanding, and effectiveness in accurately capturing the intended data. Particular attention was paid to any reported signs of distress during the pilot, and the adequacy of the support resources provided within the survey was evaluated and adjusted. This proactive approach to distress mitigation is fundamental to upholding the principle of ‘doing no harm’ in sensitive online research.

### **5.3 Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection process was facilitated using the Zoho platform, specifically Zoho Survey. Zoho Survey is a survey tool that provides comprehensive features for creating, distributing, and analysing surveys. Its features include customisable templates, various question types, data export options, and built-in security measures, which contribute significantly to the efficiency of data collection and the integrity of the collected responses<sup>34</sup>.

The survey link was then disseminated through CSO, higher learning institutions, state agencies and social media to reach the diverse population of adult Penangites. As respondents completed the online form, their submissions were automatically and securely collected and stored within the Zoho Forms database. The collection period spanned from July to October 2024.

A total of 682 survey responses were collected, with 642 respondents aged 18 and above, which is in line with the study’s participation requirements. The sample is considered representative of the population, with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of  $\pm 3.87\%$ .

### **5.4 Data Management and Analysis**

Upon collection, the raw data obtained from the Zoho platform underwent rigorous cleaning procedures to ensure data quality and accuracy. This involved systematically identifying and correcting errors or inconsistencies, checking for incomplete answers, duplicate entries, outliers, and addressing any missing values. This meticulous data cleaning process is not merely a procedural step but a critical determinant of the validity and reliability of the final prevalence rates. Without thorough cleaning, the subsequent statistical analyses would be based on flawed data, potentially leading to inaccurate prevalence estimates.

Following data clean up, the data were coded and prepared for statistical analysis. This involved calculating frequencies and percentages to illustrate the overall prevalence, and the prevalence of a specific type of harassment experienced by the respondents. Demographic characteristics of the sample, such as age distribution and gender breakdown, were also analysed using descriptive statistics to provide a comprehensive profile of the study participants.

### **5.5 Ethical Considerations**

Researching online harassment, particularly that which is sexual in nature is an inherently sensitive undertaking, carrying significant risk for respondents, including emotional distress and re-traumatisation<sup>35</sup>. Therefore, ethical guidelines were important throughout every stage of this study to ensure the safety, dignity, and well-being of all respondents and the research team.

A survivor-centred approach was adopted, prioritising the safety, preferences, agency, and well-being of potential survivors throughout the research process. The fundamental principle of ‘doing no harm’

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<sup>34</sup> PyramidBITS, (n.d.). 5 Best Practices for Mastering Data Collection with Zoho Forms, retrieved from <https://pyramidbits.tech/master-data-collection-with-zoho-forms/>

<sup>35</sup> Ogbeide, S.A. (2009). Ethical Issues in Survey Research. The International Honor Society in Psychology, 14(1), retrieved from <https://www.psichi.org/page/141EYEFall09eOgbeidt>

guided all methodological decisions, aiming to avoid causing tension, exacerbating inequalities, or increasing risks to individuals who chose to participate<sup>36</sup>.

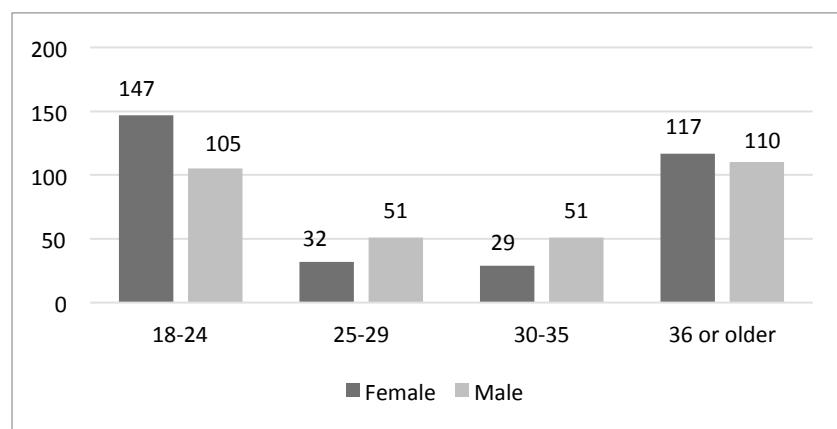
The informed consent process was designed to be transparent and comprehensive. As respondents accessed the survey, they were presented with clear and detailed information regarding the study's purpose, procedures involved and the estimated commitment time. Participation was entirely voluntary.

To safeguard respondents' privacy, stringent measures were implemented to ensure both anonymity and confidentiality. No identifiable information like names, email addresses or contact details was collected. All collected data was securely stored within the Zoho platform database. Access to the raw data was strictly limited to authorised members of the research team directly involved in data analysis.

## 6 Analysis of the survey

Figure 6.1 shows the demographics of the survey respondents. There was an almost equal distribution of respondents by gender, with 325 female respondents and 317 male respondents. The age group of 18 to 24 years old made up the largest proportion of respondents, followed by respondents aged 36 and older. Due to the smaller number of respondents aged between 25 and 35, the analysis of the survey will primarily focus on age groups 18 to 35 years and 36 years and older.

Figure 6.1 Number of respondents by age and sex

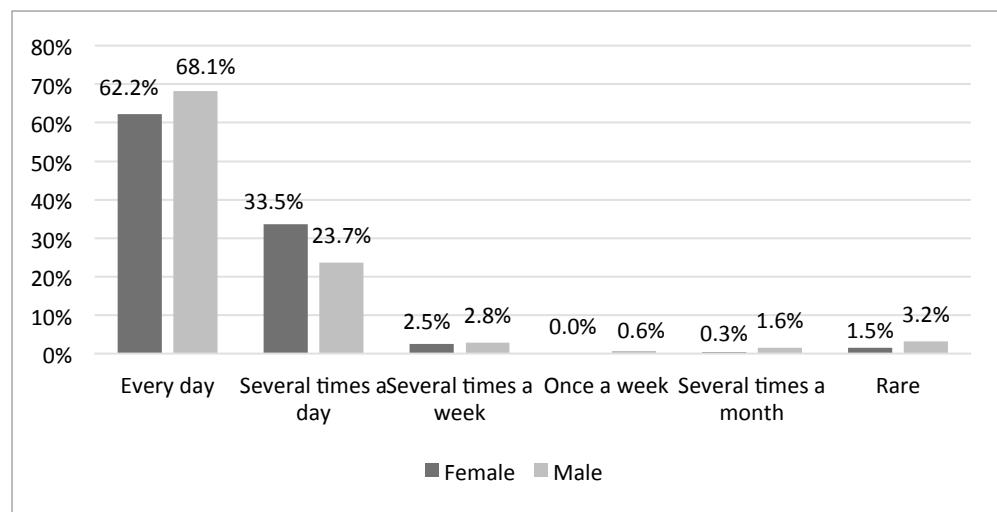


<sup>36</sup> Ellsberg, M. & Heise, S. (2005). Ethical Considerations for Researching Violence against Women. In M. Ellsberg & S. Heise (Eds), Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists, 34-47. Washington DC:World Health Organization, PATH; 2005.

## 6.1 Social media usage

**Most respondents used social media daily, with a proportion using it several times a day**

Figure 6.2 Frequency of social media usage by sex



The respondents were found to be avid users of social media, with 62.2% women and 68.1% men accessing their social media applications every day (Figure 6.2). A significant percentage reported accessing their social media multiple times a day (33.5% women; 23.7% men), while infrequent usage was minimal. There were no significant differences between the age groups; the trend persists across, though the older cohort reported a slightly more infrequent social media use.<sup>37</sup>

## 6.2 Encountering online harassment

More than half of the respondents overall reported that they had not personally experienced online harassment, with a higher proportion of men (57%) indicating this compared to women (51.8%). This trend held across age groups: for respondents aged 18 to 36, 48.1% of women and 52.9% of men reported never having experienced online harassment. Notably, older users (36+) reported even higher rates of never experiencing online harassment, at 64.9% for men and 59.8% for women.

For the respondents who had experienced online harassment, it was found that the trend differed quite significantly between the two age groups. Most respondents in the younger age group reported their first experience of harassment in adolescence (ages 17 and younger), with the percentage significantly higher among women (62%) compared to men (45.4%) (Figure 6.3). By the time they reached young adulthood (ages 18 to 24), 94.4% of women and 80.5% of men had experienced online harassment. First incidents were a lot less common after age 25, though proportions were notably higher among male respondents.

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix A, figures 1.0 and 1.1

**Most younger respondents first experienced online harassment as adolescents and teenagers. However, the pattern was reversed among the older respondents.**

Figure 6.3 Age at first experience of online sexual harassment, ages 18 to 35 years

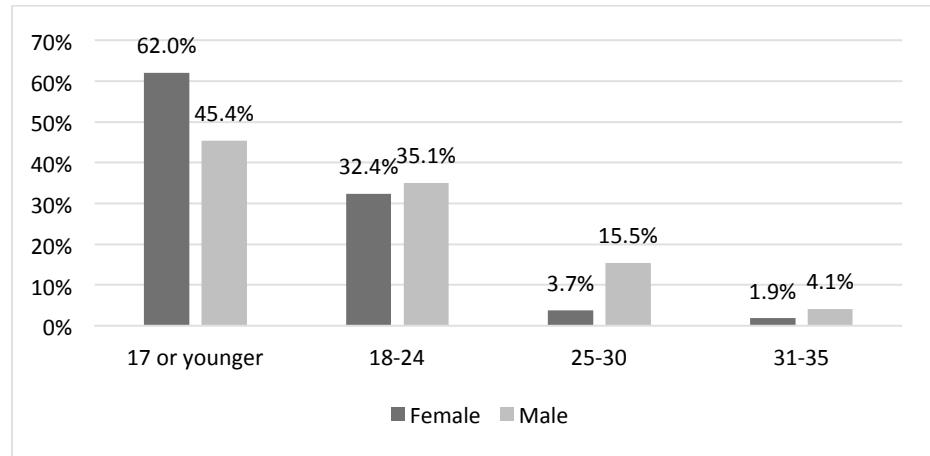
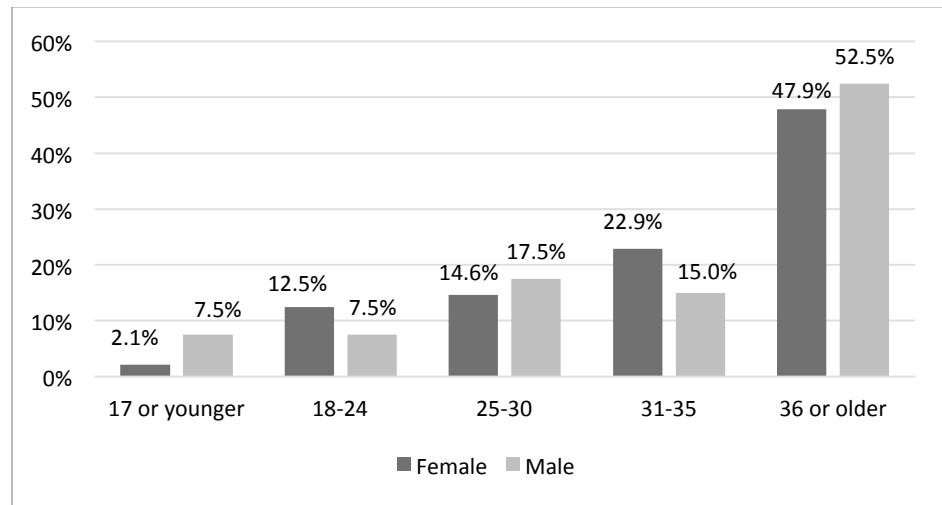


Figure 6.4 shows that the majority of them had their first encounter with online harassment when they were older, specifically 36 and older: 47.9% women and 52.5% men. Significantly fewer respondents had their first onset at younger ages, with more women experiencing online harassment at ages between 25 to 30 (22.9%) and 18 to 24 (12.4%) compared to men (15.0% for 25 to 30, 7.5% for 18 to 24). On the flip side, more men had their first experience at ages 17 and younger (7.5% vs. 2.1%) and at 25 to 30 (17.5% vs. 14.6%).

#### **In contrast, older adults first experienced harassment at age 36 or older**

Figure 6.4 Age at first experience of online sexual harassment, ages 36 and older



With the advancement of technology and the rapid rise of social media in the last decade, the pattern among older respondents encountering their first instance of harassment as adults is consistent with the fact that they would have adopted social media as adults. Additionally, there were a lot fewer social media platforms and chat applications when they were younger. Conversely, younger respondents would have grown up in the age of smartphones and similar devices with wide exposure to different platforms of social media, hence the earlier exposure, as well as ease of exposure, to online harassment.

### 6.3 Types of online harassment encountered

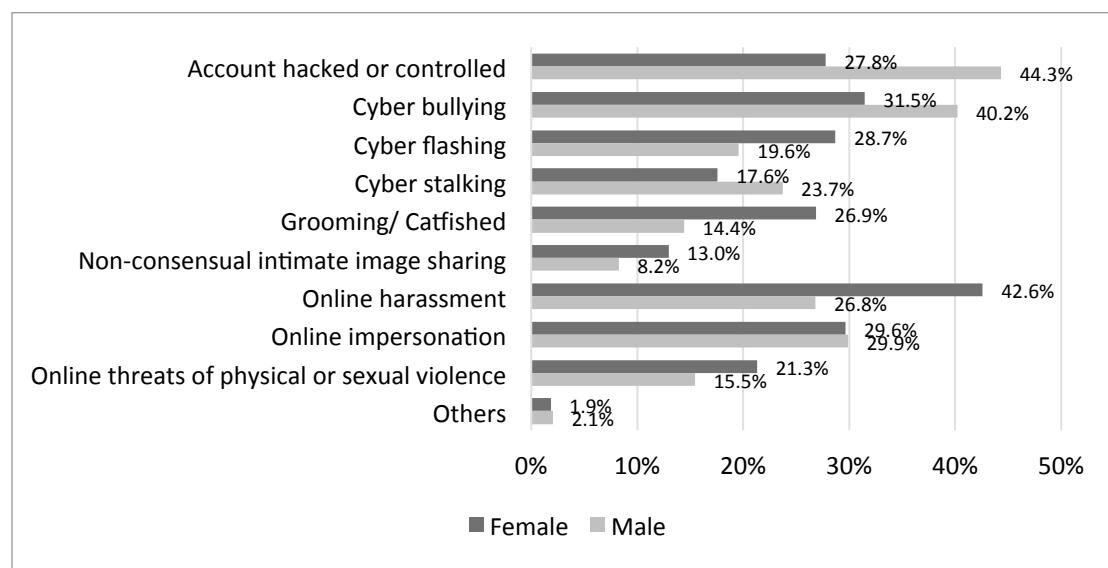
Online harassment (42.6%), cyber bullying (31.5%), cyber flashing (28.7%), and grooming/catfishing (26.9%) are among the higher instances of harassment encountered by female respondents aged between 18 and 36 years old (Figure 6.5). For the male respondents, a bigger proportion of them endured having their accounts hacked or controlled (44.3%), cyberbullying (40.2%), and online impersonation (29.9%).

However, when comparing between sexes, women aged between 18 and 36 years were found to have encountered significantly higher levels of online harassment (42.6%, 15.8 percentage points more than men) and cyber flashing (28.7%, 9.1 percentage points higher). They were also more often subjected to grooming or being catfished (26.9%, 12.5 percentage points higher) and non-consensual intimate image sharing (13.0%, 4.8 percentage points more). These forms of abuse are more gendered and sexually aggressive in nature.

In contrast, men recorded higher instances of account hacking or control (44.3%, 16.5 percentage points more than women), cyberbullying (40.2%, 8.7 percentage points more), and cyberstalking (23.7%, 6.1 percentage points more). Conversely, these incidents were generally more technologically manipulative and confrontational.

#### **Younger men reported harassment through means of hacking/bullying/impersonation; younger women reported more general harassment and sexualised harms**

Figure 6.5 Types of online sexual harassment encountered by sex, ages 18 to 35 years



*Note: respondents were allowed to pick more than one option*

As established earlier, older users recorded lower percentages of having encountered online sexual harassment. This could be attributed to the fact that social media was less developed and prevalent during their younger years, resulting in reduced chances for accessibility, thus lowering the risk of harassment. Furthermore, although the forms of harassment more commonly encountered by older individuals presented differences compared to the younger age group, specific patterns within these experiences were still discernible.

As Figure 6.6 shows, older women were subjected to high incidences of online impersonation (37.5%) and accounts hacked or controlled (37.5%), which differs from the harassment experienced by younger women, although the incidences of cyber bullying (25.0%) and grooming/catfishing (25%) were similar. Conversely, and more consistent with the experiences of younger men, the older men

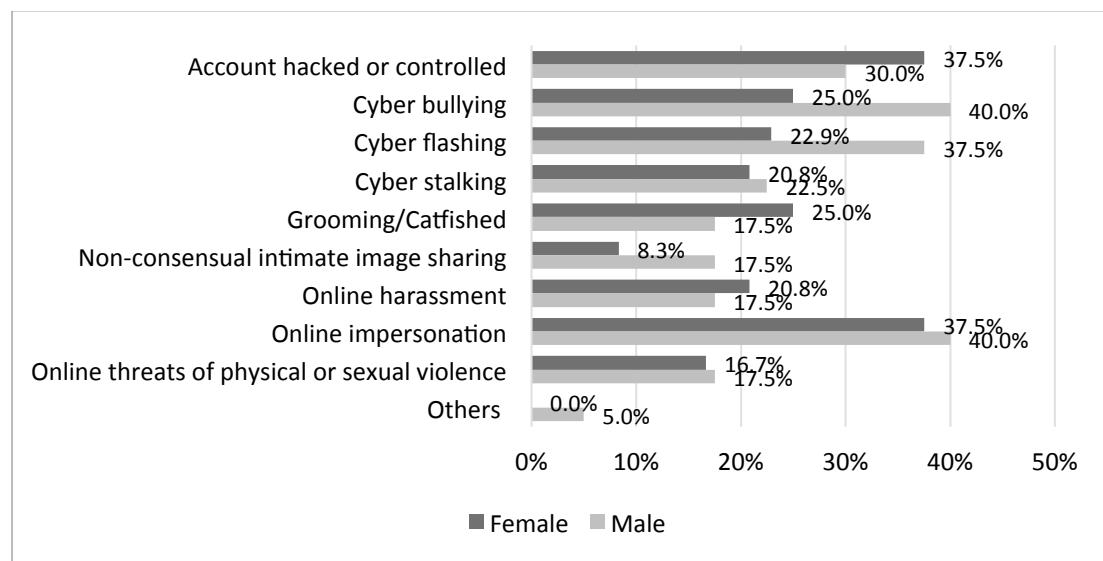
also saw higher incidences of being cyber-bullied (40.0%) and subjected to cyber stalking (23.7%), but a much higher proportion of older men encountered cyber flashing (37.5%) and being impersonated online (40.0%).

The gender differences in harassment encountered by older users are also markedly different in certain ways. Although instances of online harassment (women 20.8%; men 17.5%) and grooming/catfished (women 25.0%, men 17.5%) were still higher among older women compared to men in the same age group, they differed significantly in the hacking or controlling of accounts, with women reporting 7.5 percentage points higher than men.

Conversely, a bigger percentage of men encountered cyber flashing (14.6 p.p. higher) and non-consensual intimate image sharing (9.2 p.p. higher). This represents a distinct gender difference and a notable divergence from trend observed among the younger men, for these specific types of harassment. It had to be noted however, that the sample for older respondents were smaller than the younger respondents, which may have accounted for the variance in experiences.

**Older men reported significantly higher incidences of cyberbullying/cyber flashing, older women indicated higher rates of having their accounts hacked/controlled and being groomed/catfished**

Figure 6.6 Types of online harassment encountered by sex, ages 36 years and older



*Note: respondents were allowed to pick more than one option*

Nevertheless, a clear trend is observed among the younger respondents: younger women are more targeted for gendered or sexually explicit forms of harassment (grooming/catfished, cyber flashing, non-consensual intimate image sharing) while the men are more commonly exposed to technical or aggressive forms of online abuse (accounts hacked or controlled, cyber bullying).

Among older respondents, however, the trend is less pronounced. The differences in types of harassment between men and women seemed to be more unexpected than what was presented in the literature. The pattern of older male respondents encountering a higher rate of cyber-flashing and non-consensual intimate picture sharing may be due to different online behaviours across different platforms, or perhaps a lack of digital literacy in managing online privacy.

In a separate question, respondents were also asked whether they had ever acted as perpetrators in the online world. A majority of the respondents answered in the negative, with women at a higher rate across both age cohorts. More specifically, 91.3% of younger women and 93.2% of older women

professed that they had never harassed anyone online, compared to 86.5% of older men and 85.4% of younger men.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that men are more likely to act as harassers in the online world, though it is noted that these are self-reported figures.

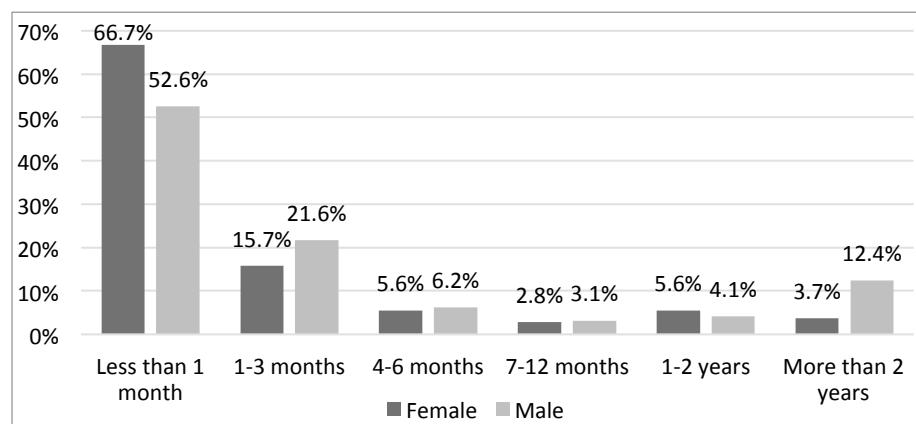
Among those who admitted to online harassment, younger women more commonly confessed to cyber-stalking (25.0%) and cyberbullying (20.8%) while older women cited cyberstalking (35%). Younger men engaged in cyber-stalking (23.1%) and hacking/controlling others' accounts (15.4%), while older men showed a broader spectrum of offences, with cyberbullying and online impersonation sustaining the highest percentages (14.3% respectively).<sup>39</sup>

#### 6.4 Length of harassment encountered

Both age groups show similar trends when it comes to the length of harassment. The harassment encountered typically lasted for less than a month for about slightly more than half of the respondents, trending higher at 66.7% for women aged between 18 to 36 compared to men (52.6%) (Figure 6.7). Incidents lasting between one to three months are more prevalent among younger adults, and higher in younger men (21.6%; women 15.7%). Longer periods of harassment are typical among the younger age group, though a markedly higher percentage of younger men indicated a period of harassment lasting more than two years (12.4% vs. 3.7% women).

##### Shorter periods of harassment are more common among younger adults

Figure 6.7 Length of abuse, ages 18 to 35 years



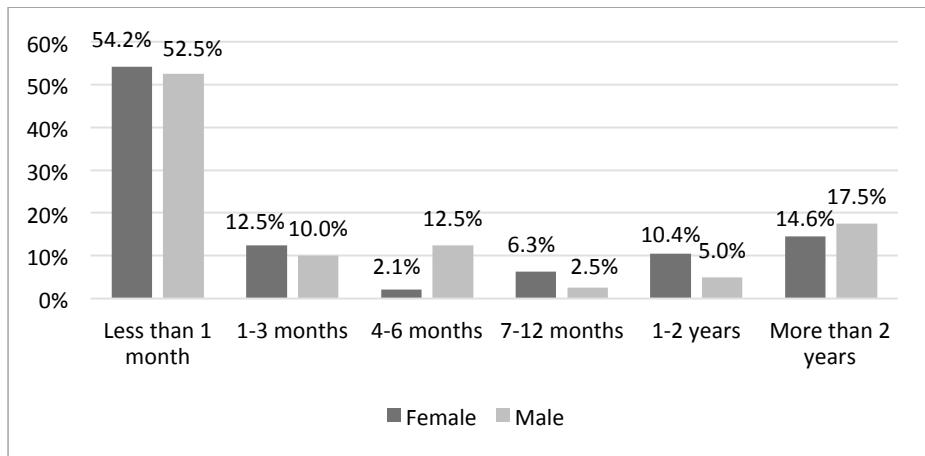
Among older adults, the reported rates for harassment lasting less than a month were similar (women 54.2%, men 52.5%). However, longer periods of abuse are seemingly more widespread among older adults. Figure 6.8 shows that higher percentages of older adults endured the harassment for one to two years (10.4% vs. 5.6% of younger women; 5% vs 4.1% younger men). Adding to that, abuse lasting more than two years is also significantly higher among older adults (14.6% vs. younger women 3.7%; 17.4% vs. younger men 12.4%). Sustained harassment is found to be more prevalent in the older age cohort, while younger adults – notably younger women – reported shorter episodes of harassment.

<sup>38</sup> See Appendix A, figures 1.2 and 1.3

<sup>39</sup> See Appendix A, figures 1.4 and 1.5

## Higher proportion of older adults encountered longer periods of harassment comparatively

Figure 6.8 Length of harassment, ages 36 and older

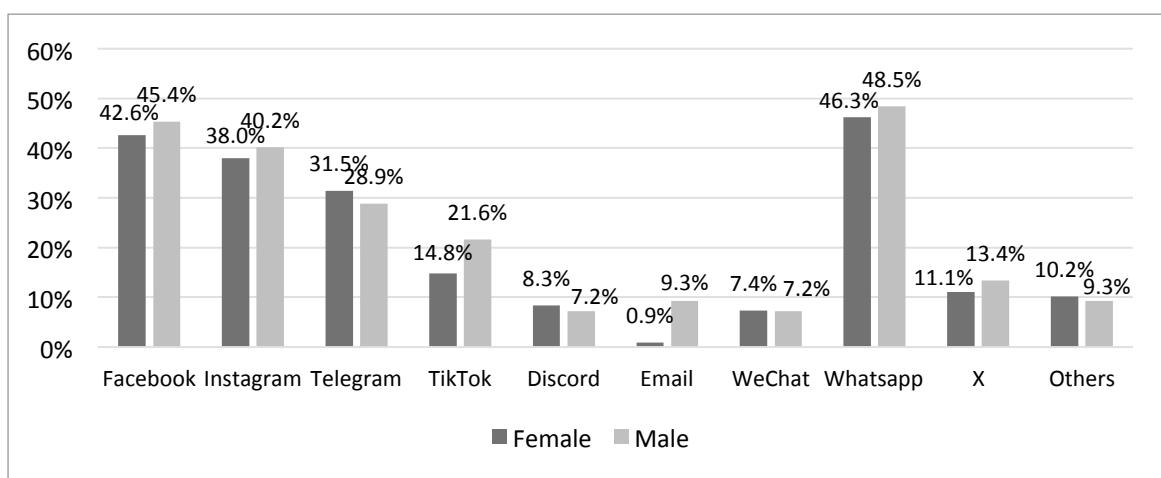


## 6.5 Platform of harassment

The trend of harassment across different social media platforms is expected to be dependent upon patterns of usage. Among younger adults, as Figure 6.9 shows, the harassment most frequently happened on WhatsApp (women 46.4%; men 48.5%) followed very closely by Facebook (women 42.6%; men 45.4%) and Instagram (women 38.0%; men 40.2%). Harassment on Telegram is also considerably substantial for women; close to a third of them (31.5%) encountered it, though men were not very far behind (28.9%). On the other hand, incidents taking place via TikTok and email are noticeably higher among men – 21.6% vs. 14.8% for TikTok and 9.3% vs. 0.9% for email.

### WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram are the more common platforms of harassment for younger adults

Figure 6.9 Platforms where the abuse occurred, ages 18 to 35 years



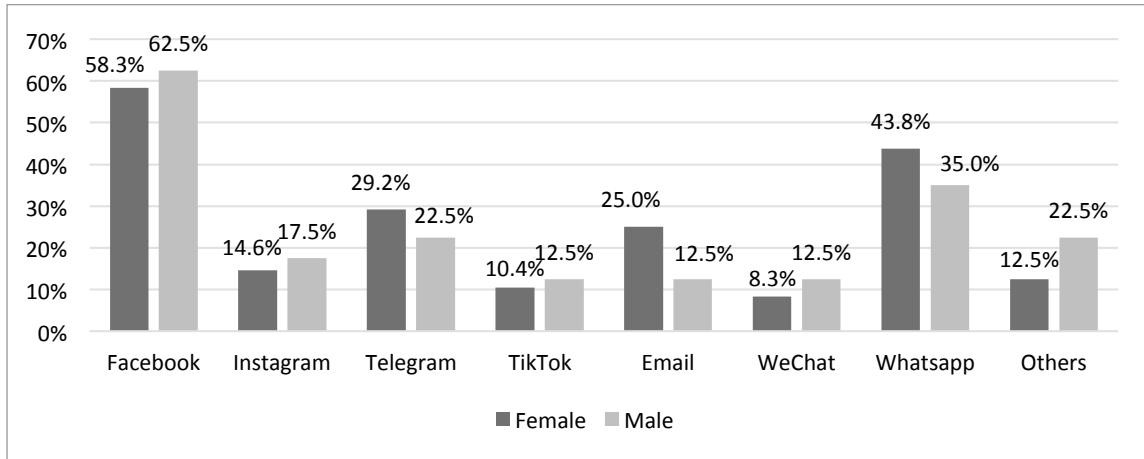
*Note: respondents were allowed to pick more than one option*

Figure 6.10 illustrates that the patterns differ among older adults. Facebook tops the list; more than half of the respondents encountered harassment on the platform (women 58.3%; men 62.5%). WhatsApp is also a main platform of harassment, with 43.8% women and 35.0% men indicating

harassment. Online harassment also occurred on Telegram, though to a slightly lesser degree compared against younger adults (2.3 p.p. lower for women; 11.4 p.p. lower for men). Additionally, reported harassment on Instagram among older adults was vastly lower than their younger cohorts (14.6% vs. 38.0% for women, 17.5% vs. 40.2%).

### **Facebook is the most common platform of abuse for older adults, followed by WhatsApp and Telegram**

Figure 6.10 Platforms where the harassment occurred, ages 36 and older



*Note: respondents were allowed to pick more than one option. Discord and X are negligible among older adults*

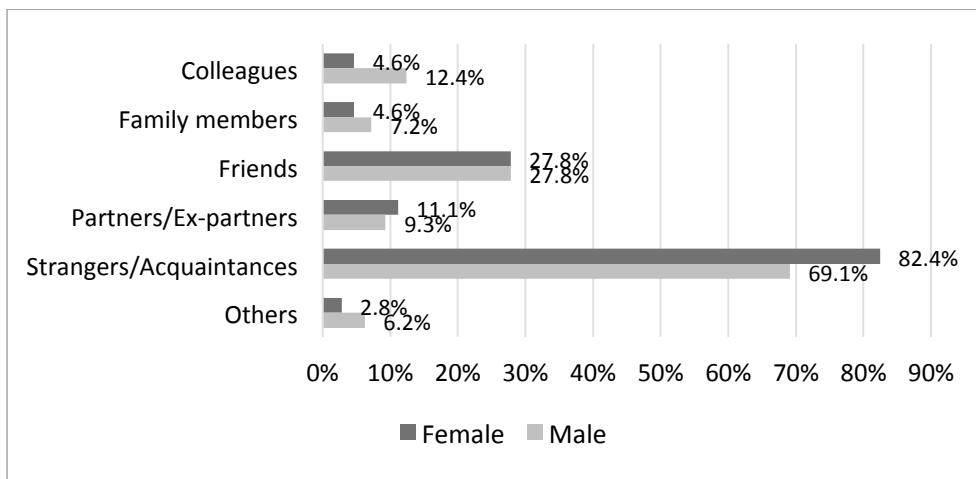
Facebook and WhatsApp are two applications that are long established and widely used, hence the higher shares of usage among the respondents, which then naturally translates into higher instances of abuse for both age cohorts. Being that Instagram and TikTok are newer social media applications, they may have a lower uptake rate among older adults, hence the lower observations of abuse among them. In contrast, social media “clout” and the influencer culture would be significantly more popular among younger adults. The public creator-driven environment of Instagram and TikTok increases visibility and influence, aligning with the higher instances of reported abuse.

### **6.6 Identity of harassers**

The most common harassers are strangers or acquaintances, meaning the perpetrators are more likely to be someone that the survivors are unfamiliar with. Among the younger adults, 82.4% of women and 69.1% of men indicated at least one of their harassers to be a stranger or acquaintance (Figure 6.11). Additionally, more than one-fourth of the younger adults – both men and women – indicated harassment by someone they considered as friends. Partners/ex-partners accounted for 11.1% of perpetrators among women and 9.3% among men. Colleagues and family members were less frequently identified as abusers.

## Strangers and/or acquaintances are most frequently identified as harassers by younger adults

Figure 6.11 Identity of the abusers, ages 18 to 35 years

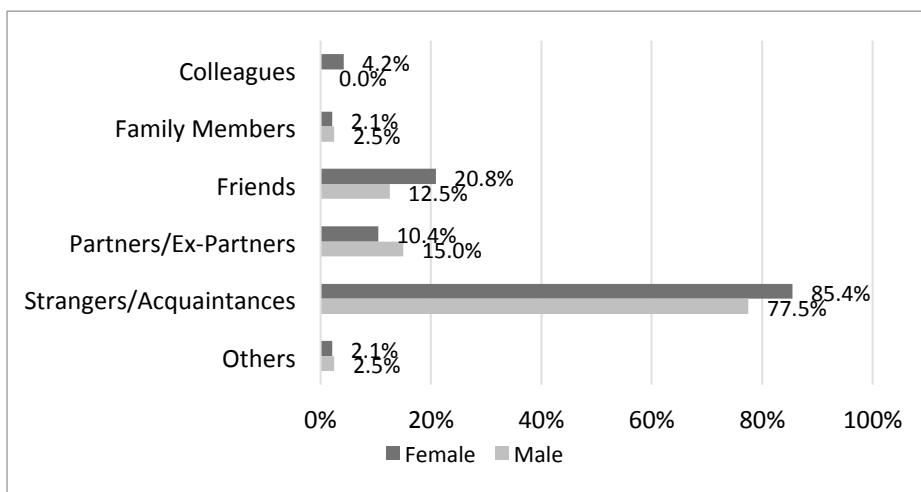


*Note: respondents were allowed to pick more than one option*

Meanwhile, for the older cohort, Figure 6.12 depicts the same pattern: strangers/acquaintances remain the largest group of perpetrators, with higher shares (women +3%; men +11.6%) compared against younger adults. Friends are the second most common harassers, at 20.8% for women and 12.5% for men, lower than the younger cohort for both sexes. Family members and colleagues are not as frequently cited, though a higher share of older men identified partners/ex-partners as an abuser (15.0%, +6.7% vs younger men).

## The same is observed for older adults, with highest instances of strangers/acquaintances being the abuser

Figure 6.12 Identity of the abusers, ages 36 and older



*Note: respondents were allowed to pick more than one option*

The identity of online harassers somewhat aligns with the patterns of social media usage, as the use of Facebook, Instagram and Telegram are prevalent among respondents of both age groups. These platforms are designed for public interaction and outreach, which unfortunately also increases the chances for unwanted contact and harassment from unknown individuals. The nature of these

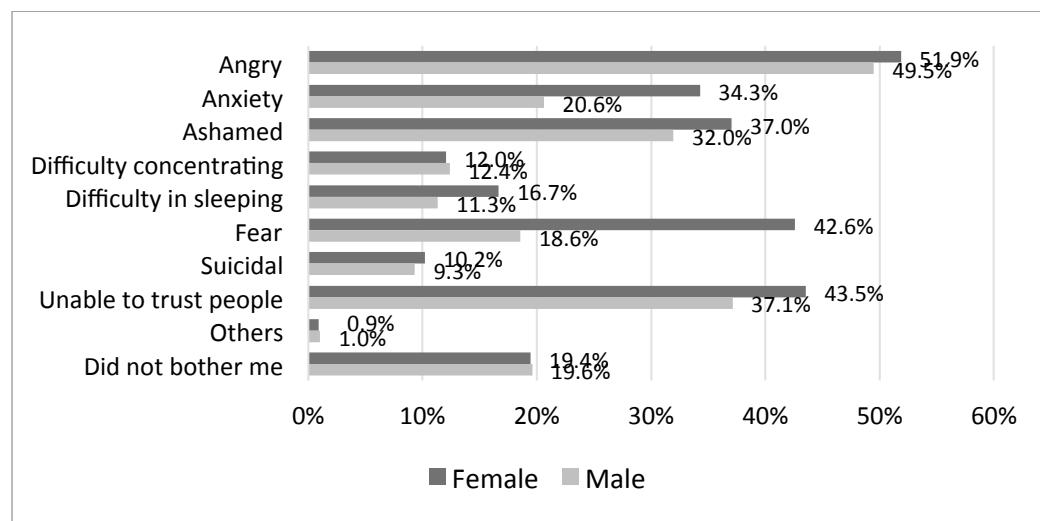
platforms also allow for multiple account creation and general obscurity, which acts to enable anonymous perpetrators.

## 6.7 Emotional consequences of online harassment

For the younger cohort, the most common emotional repercussions are feelings of anger (women 51.9%, men 49.5%) and inability to trust others (women 43.5%, men 37.1%) (Figure 6.13). Feelings of fear and anxiety are significantly higher among younger women, standing at 24 and 13.7 percentage points higher than the men respectively. A higher percentage of women also felt ashamed about the online harassment endured (women 37%, men 32%). Women were also slightly likely to suffer from difficulties in sleeping and in concentrating, although the gap is small. On the other hand, about 1 in 5 of the respondents, for both men and women, indicated that the harassment had no effect on them.

**Anger and inability to trust are most commonly felt among younger adults; a high proportion of younger women also reported feeling afraid**

Figure 6.13 Emotional and mental distress experienced by survivors, ages 18 to 35 years

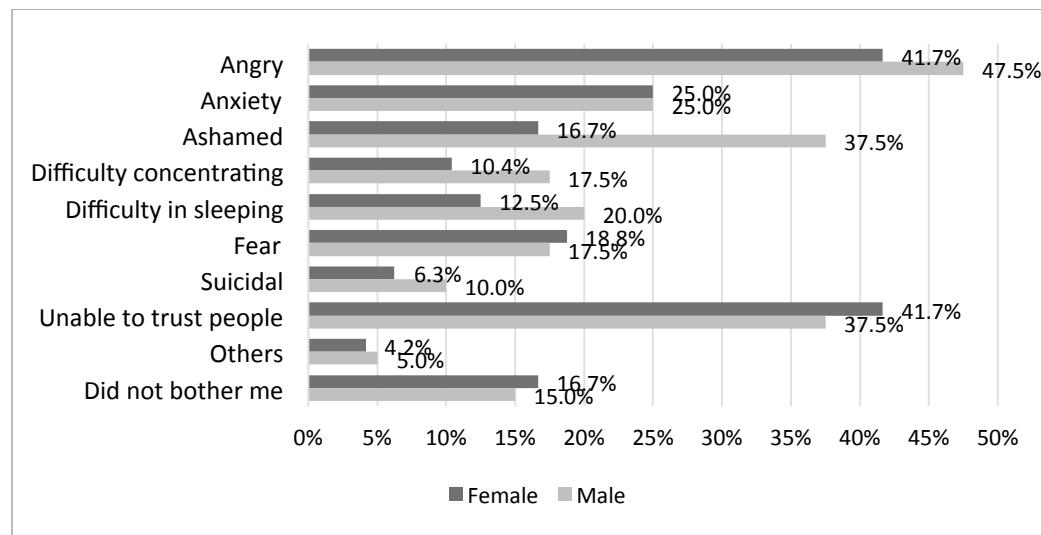


*Note: respondents are allowed to pick more than one option*

Mirroring the younger age group, feelings of anger are the most prominent among older adults (women 41.7%, men 47.5%), followed by the inability to trust others (women 41.7%, men 37.5%). However, when comparing against younger adults, feelings of fear are much lower among older women (23.8 p.p. lower), though the percentage is similar among older men (Figure 6.14). Interestingly, feelings of shame are much higher in older men compared to older women (20.8 p.p. higher). Functional impacts are also more conspicuous among older men – a higher percentage of them had more difficulty sleeping (women 12.5%, men 20.0%) and concentrating (women 10.4%, men 17.5%). A slightly lower percentage, in comparison to the younger age group, cited that they were not bothered by the online sexual harassment encountered (women 16.7%, men 15.0%).

**The same pattern of anger and inability to trust reflected among older adults; a higher share of older men indicated feelings of shame**

Figure 6.14 Emotional and mental distress experienced by survivors, ages 36 and above



*Note: respondents are allowed to pick more than one option*

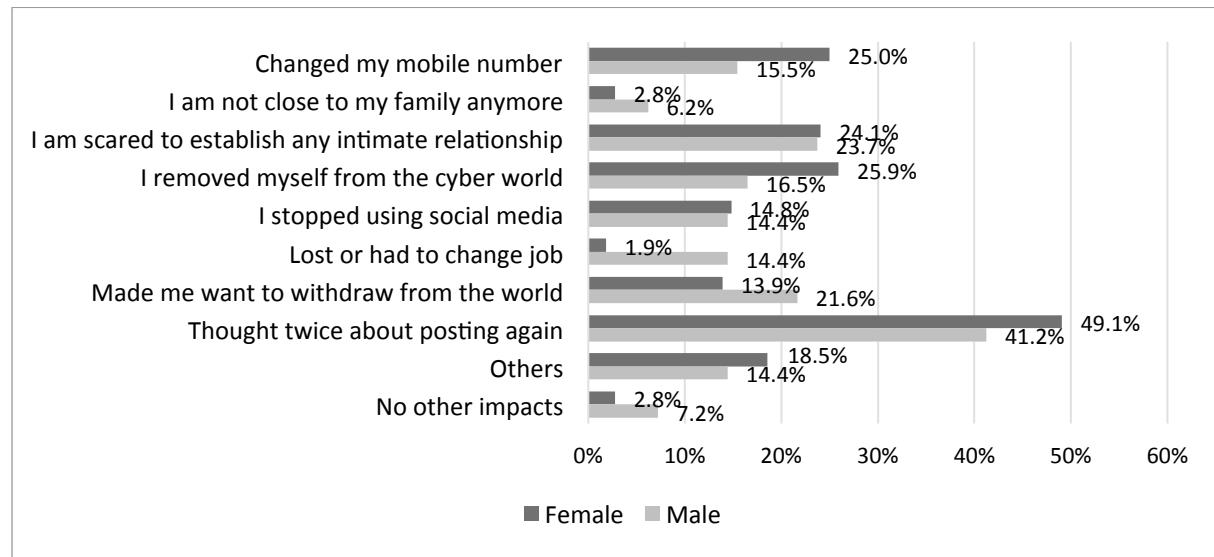
Overall, feelings of anger and loss of trust are the most common outcomes for both groups. However, among the women, the younger group reported stronger acute distress (fear, anxiety) and slightly higher levels of shame. For men, older men show more shame and day-to-day disruption (sleep, concentration). The feelings of fear decline with age for women, but remaining stable for men.

## 6.8 Other impacts of online harassment

The most selected behavioural impact among younger adults is self-censorship – 49.1% of women and 41.2% of men thought twice about posting again (Figure 6.15). Women are observed to lean towards taking targeted safety steps – 25% changed their numbers (vs. 15.5% men) and 25.9% chose to take themselves offline (vs. 16.5% men). However, men showed a higher inclination to withdraw from the real world (21.6% vs 13.9% woman) and greater job consequences (14.4% vs 1.9% women). There were also apprehension and fear in starting intimate, personal relationships, consistent with the high levels of distrust reported earlier (Figure 6.13 & Figure 6.14).

**Younger adults mostly self-censor; women are more likely to change numbers/go offline, while men report more job impacts and offline withdrawal**

Figure 6.15 Additional impacts from online harassment, ages 18 to 35 years

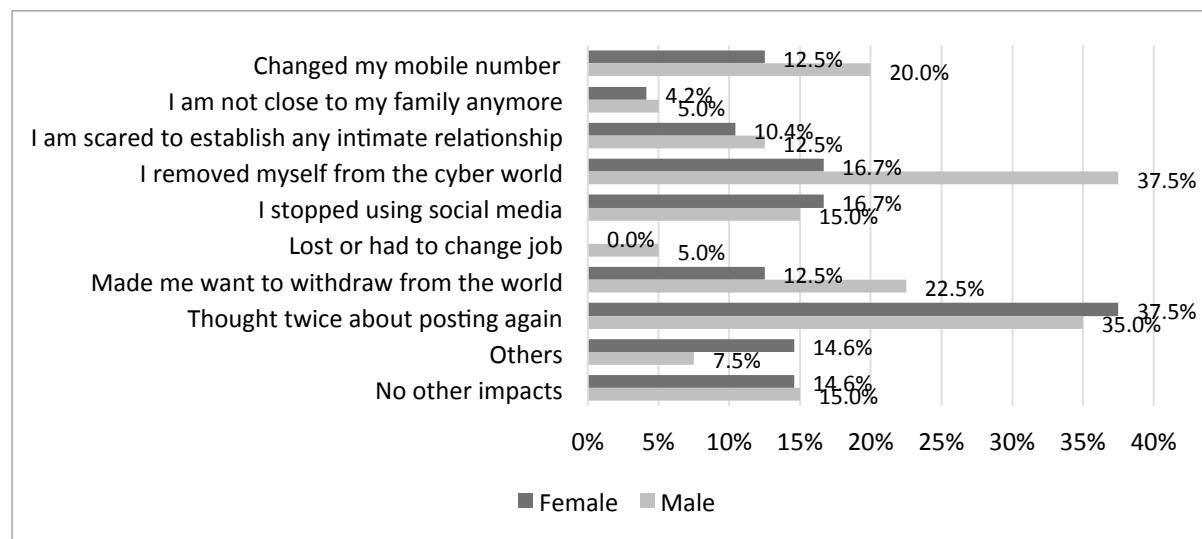


*Note: respondents are allowed to pick more than one option*

As Figure 6.16 shows, self-censorship is also prevalent among the older adults (women 37.5%, men 35%), although at lower levels compared to the younger cohort. Older men show stronger withdrawal overall, from both online (removed themselves from cyber world, 37.5% vs 16.7%) and real world (withdrew from the world: 22.5% vs 12.5%). They were also comparatively more likely to change their numbers (7.5 p.p higher). There seems to be less fear in establishing intimate relationships (women 10.4%, men 12.5%) compared against younger adults, but they are slightly more inclined to stop using social media (women 1.9 p.p. higher, men 0.6 p.p. higher).

**Older adults show caution about posting again; older men tend to change numbers and withdraw**

Figure 6.16 Additional impacts from online harassment, ages 36 and older



*Note: respondents are allowed to pick more than one option*

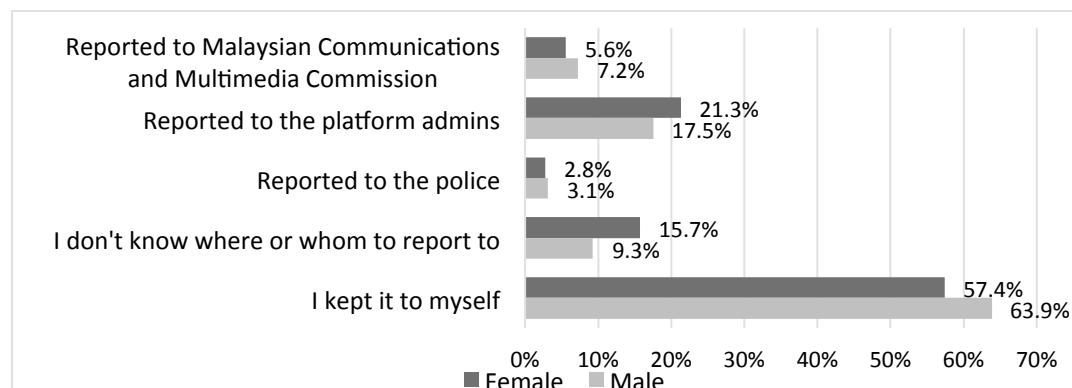
Self-censorship is seen to be the most common behavioural change across the board, with higher proportions of respondents indicating such, although it declines slightly with age. Other behavioural impacts diverge by sex and age cohorts. Younger women tended to adopt targeted safety steps by changing their numbers and going offline, as reflected by higher levels of fear and anxiety, while older women are less inclined to do so. On the other hand, men showed higher propensity for withdrawal, with older men more likely to withdraw from both online and offline life, aligning with a higher percentage share of insomnia and loss of concentration.

## 6.9 Responding to online harassment

More than half of the respondents overall were found to have kept the harassment they faced to themselves. Among the younger respondents, 57.4% of women and 63.9% of men did not voice out about the harassment, while 15.7% women and 9.3% men indicated that they did not know the process of reporting (Figure 6.17). Comparatively, a smaller percentage took action, with most of them reporting to platform administrators (women 21.3%, men 17.5%). Smaller shares reported to official channels such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission and the police.

**Over half of younger adults kept the incident to themselves; reporting to platform administrators was the next most common action**

Figure 6.17 Post-incidence response, ages 18 to 35 years

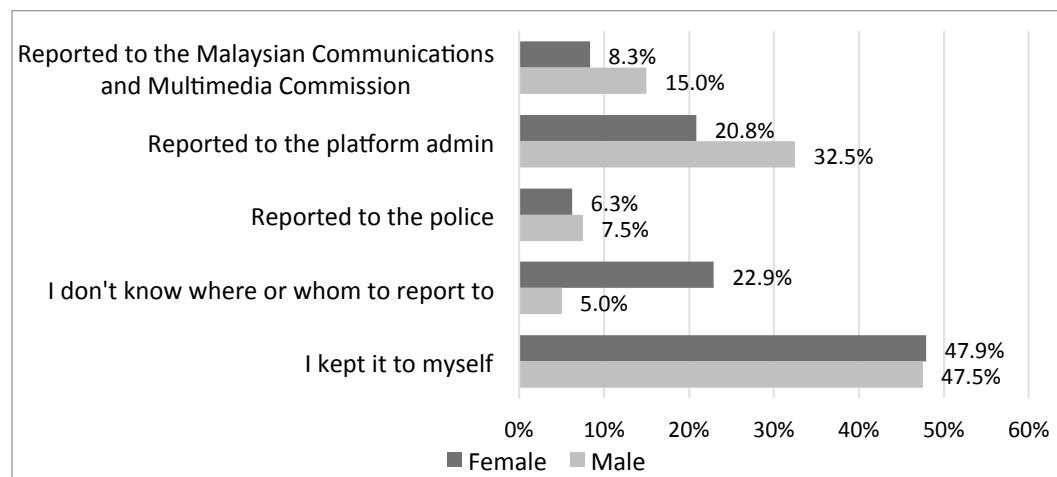


*Note: respondents are allowed to pick more than one option*

Silence was also prevalent among the older respondents, but a higher proportion was found to have taken action. Figure 6.18 shows that the percentage of respondents keeping it to themselves was similar among sexes (47.7% women, 47.5% men). However, a higher share of older women were unfamiliar with reporting mechanisms (17.9 p.p higher than men). Platform administrators remain the primary channel for reporting (20.8% women, 32.8% men). Compared with the younger cohort, a greater percentage of older respondents reported using official channels, with the police remaining the least chosen option.

**Similar patterns are observed among older adults; most chose not to disclose, and a few opted to report to platform administrators compared to the younger cohort**

Figure 6.18 Post-incidence response, ages 36 and older



*Note: respondents are allowed to pick more than one option*

Overall, non-disclosure was the decision taken by most respondents upon encountering online harassment, with younger men recording the highest share. The higher percentages of women in both cohorts citing the lack of knowledge and information on reporting processes is concerning. For those who chose to report, platform administrators are the most utilised channel, and markedly higher than the official channels. This indicates a lack of public awareness as well as a lack of trust in official authorities, which may contribute to the underreporting of online harassment.

## 6.10 Reporting outcomes

More than half of the younger adults indicated that either there was no outcome (women 22.2%, men 24.0%) or they were unsure whether any action was taken after reporting (women 40.7%, men 48%) (Figure 6.19). Positive outcomes after reporting was comparatively lower: 37% of women and 24% of men saw their abusers blocked on the platform. Only 4.0% of men reported that their harasser was arrested.

**Most younger adults were unsure of outcome, with abuser being blocked being the next most common outcome**

Figure 6.19 Outcome after reporting, ages 18 to 35 years

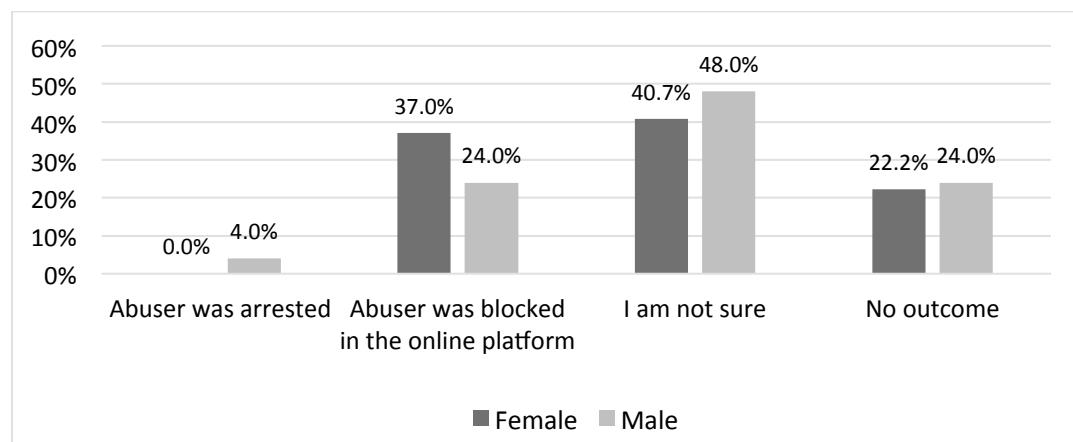
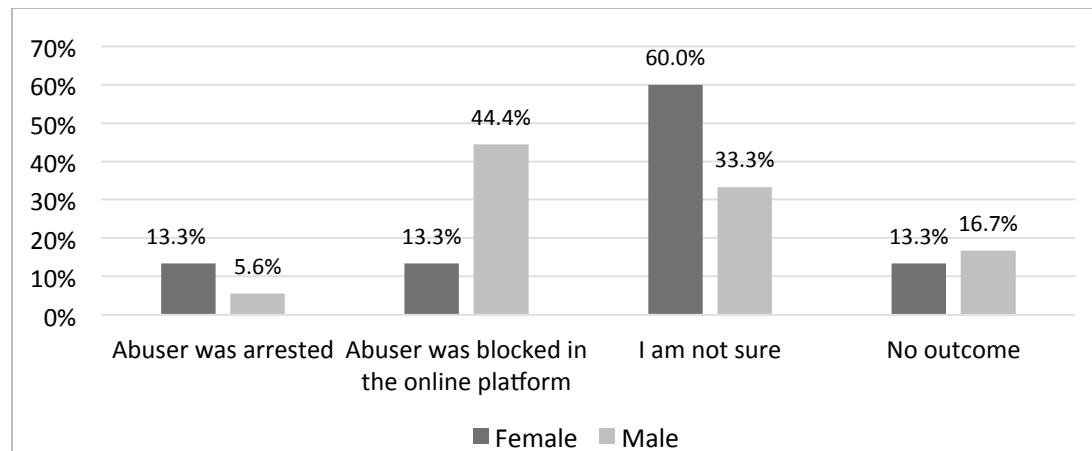


Figure 6.20 shows similar post-reporting trends for the older cohort, with 13.3% of women and 16.7% professing no outcome, and higher percentages indicating they were unsure of the investigation results (women 60.0%, men 33.3%). However, older men had higher success rates in having their abuser blocked on online platforms (31.1 p.p. higher than women). On the flip side, older women more frequently reported that their abuser was arrested (7.7 p.p. higher than men).

**A high percentage of older women reported being unsure of outcome, while more men saw their abuser blocked on online platforms**

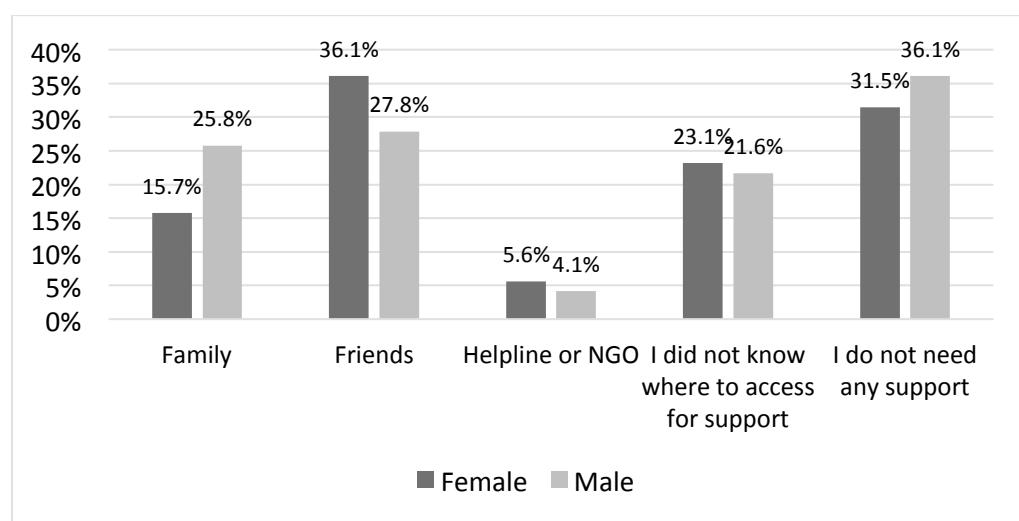
Figure 6.20 Outcome after reporting, ages 36 and older



Overall, the survivors who reported were unlikely to receive clear feedback, and this will possibly deter them from reporting if they are harassed again. The blocking of harassers on platforms are seemingly more effective and more common than arrests. This may be because it is relatively simpler to block a harasser, or perhaps the threshold for criminal charges was not met. Nevertheless, clear, timely outcomes need to be communicated to the survivors so that they have some form of closure in one way or another.

**Younger adults more often reported not needing support or seeking support from friends**

Figure 6.21 Gaining support after encountering online harassment, ages 18 to 35 years



Among the younger cohort, most either cited that they didn't need support, or they sought support from friends (Figure 6.21). Men were more likely to state that they did not need support (36.1% vs. 31.5% women) while women more often turned to friends for support (36.1% vs. 27.8% men). The

preference for family support was also higher among men, as 25.8% sought out family as compared to 15.7% of women. Close to one-fourth of respondents (23.1% women, 21.6% men) did not know where to reach out for support. Additionally, the use of helpline/NGOs was low – only 5.6% of women and 4.1% of men reached out to these channels.

**About one-in-three older adults reported that they did not need support; a notable share of older women did not know where to access support**

Figure 6.22 Gaining support after encountering online harassment, ages 36 and older

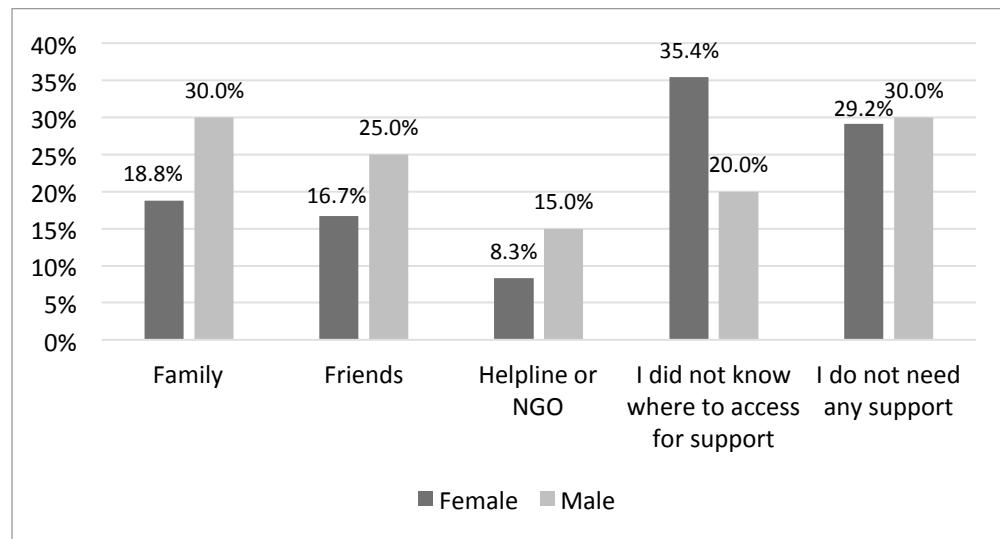


Figure 6.22 shows that the share of older adults indicating that they did not need any support is considerably high: 30.0% of men and 29.2% of women. However, more than one-third of older women reported not knowing where to gain support, a gap of 15.4 percentage points compared to older men. Additionally, men were noticeably more likely to seek support, with a higher proportion of them reaching out to family (30.0% vs 18.8% women), friends (25.0% vs 16.7 women), and helplines/NGOs (15.0% vs 8.3%). In contrast to younger women, older women were less likely to reach out to friends (-19.4 p.p.). The use of helplines and NGOs were also much higher for older adults.

Across both age groups cohorts, the act of seeking support is seemingly absent: a significant proportion professed not needing support or not knowing where to access support. There was heavier reliance on family for older men, with both age cohorts similarly dependent on friends. The high proportion of older women not knowing where to gain help and the proportionately low use of NGOs/helplines are concerning; they indicate a clear need for better signposting and awareness on support options and resources.

A follow-up question on awareness of NGOs/organisations that support online harassment survivors further cemented the suspicion that most respondents were generally not aware of the support mechanisms available. More than 90% of younger adults and older men professed that they did not know about the existence of such support systems.<sup>40</sup> Older women were the only group with notable awareness; 23.9% of them stated that they were aware of such support mechanisms.

However, when asked to name these organisations, younger women (at 100.0%) were the only group to correctly identified Women's Centre for Change (WCC) as the organisation providing support to survivors. Others erroneously attributed support to Penang Women's Development Corporation (PWDC) and The Women and Family Development Committee (JPWK) – bodies that do not directly

<sup>40</sup> See Appendix, figures 1.5 and 1.6

provide services, but are able to direct survivors to the right channels Awareness was lower among men (younger men 25.0%, older men 16.7%).<sup>41</sup> 48.6% of older women named WCC as a support mechanism; a notable percentage (10.8%) named Befrienders. 21.6% indicated “others”; however they did not name these organisations. This underscores the earlier finding that many older women did not know where to seek help from; knowing that support services exist did not necessarily mean knowing who to contact and how to access them, or opting to use them.

**Most younger adults would accompany survivors in reporting to authorities; more men tended towards not involving themselves**

Figure 6.23 Supporting friends/family on encountering online harassment, ages 18 to 35 years

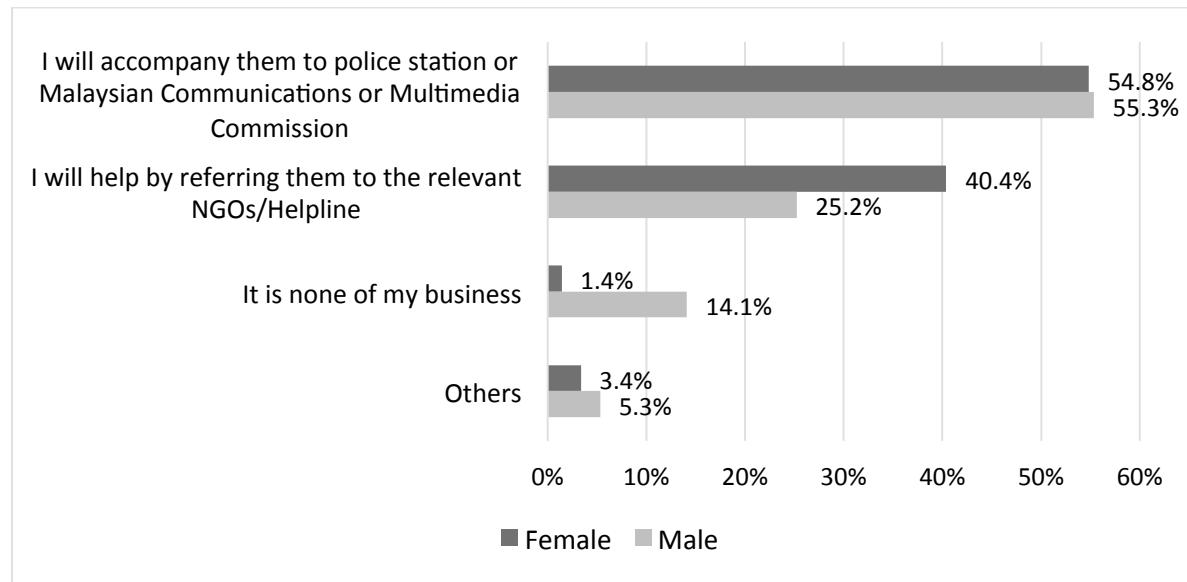
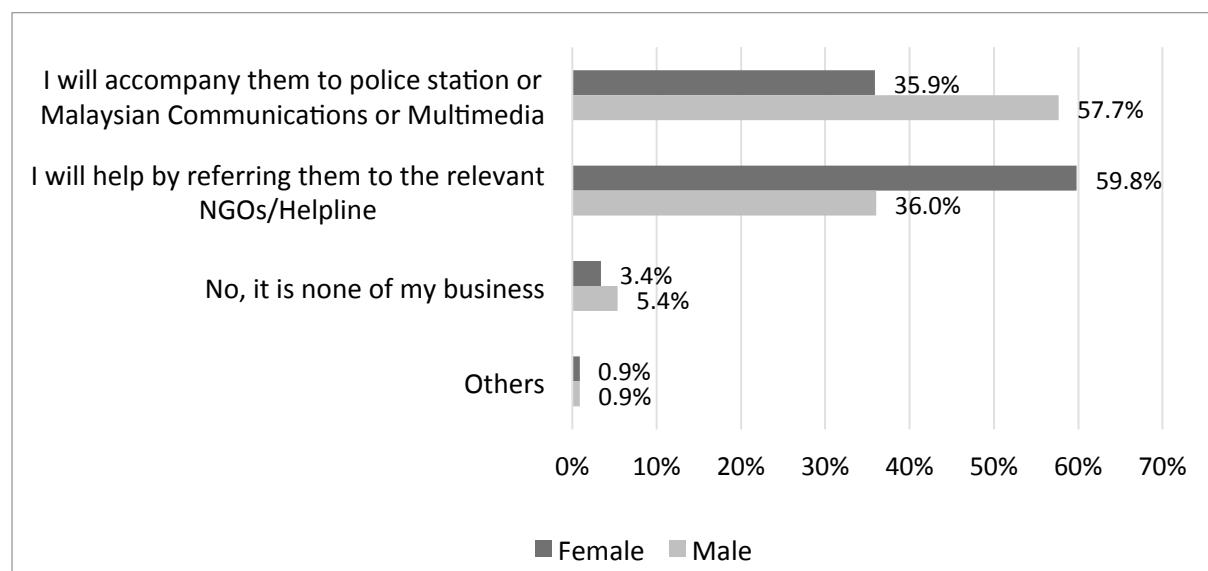


Figure 6.23 shows that more than half the younger respondents would choose to accompany their friends or family in reporting to MCMC or the police (women 54.8%, 55.3%). 40.4% of women would direct them to the relevant organisations or helplines, while less men (25.2%) were inclined to do the same. 14.1% of men stated that it was “none of their business” – 12.7 percentage points higher than women.

<sup>41</sup> See Appendix, figures 1.7 and 1.8

**Over half of older women would refer survivors to NGOs/helplines; a comparable share of older men would accompany them to report to the authorities**

Figure 6.24 Supporting friends/family on encountering online harassment, ages 36 and older



Among older adults, reference to the relevant NGOs/helplines would be the route most taken by older women in supporting friends and family members should they encounter harassment (59.8%, men 36.0%) (Figure 6.24). Men, on the other hand, would opt to offer support by accompanying them to lodge official reports. In comparison to the younger adults, empathy was higher for older men (+9.7%), but slightly lower for older women (-2.0%).

Overall, the willingness to help is high, but the mode of support differs by sex and age. Women lean more towards referral to NGOs/helplines (especially the older age group). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to offer in-person support by accompany survivors to lodge reports with official authorities – this pattern is reflected across the age groups. Empathy is generally strong – but younger men had higher unwillingness to involve themselves.

## 7 Bringing it Together: Summary of Findings

Across both age cohorts, more than half the respondents (younger women close to half at 48.1%) reported having no personal experience with online harassment. Among those who had encountered harassment, the timing diverged across age groups. Younger women reported first incidences in adolescence (younger than 17). By age 24, a majority of women – and most younger men – had had a first encounter. In contrast, older adults reported their first exposure at age 36 or older.

The types of harassment encountered also differ. Younger women more often reported sexualised, gendered harassment such as cyberflashing and being groomed/catfish, alongside general harassment. Men, on the other hand, had their accounts compromised and was subjected to cyberbullying in greater proportions. The older age group showed less pronounced splits: impersonation and hacked accounts were high among older women (with grooming/catfishing remaining prominent). Older men, however, saw a higher propensity of harassment in the form of cyberflashing, though cyberbullying was still common.

WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram are the most common where platforms where online harassment occur, and this cuts across both age groups and sexes. Instagram and TikTok incidents were more

common for the younger adults. The perpetrators are most often strangers or acquaintances (with a higher distribution among older adults), with friends being the second most common culprit. Partners and ex-partners as harassers are relatively low overall but higher among older men. Together, these distributions reflect a mix of public and semi-public spaces as well as private channels (direct messaging and group chats) – signifying that online abuse spans across all online contexts.

When it comes to duration of abuse, most respondents reported that the harassment lasted for less than a month, and this cuts across both cohorts and sexes. However, longer periods of abuse (1 to 2 years, 2 years and more) are more prevalent among older adults, more so among men. A smaller subset of younger men also reported episodes sustained for more than 2 years.

Impact profiles are broadly consistent, with feelings of anger and loss of trust dominating in every group, cutting across age and sex. Feelings of fear and anxiety are higher in younger women; feelings of shame are prominent among younger respondents of both sexes, and is higher among older men compared to older women. Older men also indicated significant functional impacts (loss of sleep and difficulty in concentrating). Behaviourally, self-censorship is high in both cohorts (higher among younger adults). Women more often chose to change their numbers or go offline, while men are more likely to withdraw overall, from both online and offline life.

Most survivors – across age and sex – chose not to seek help, instead they kept it to themselves, more so among younger men. When they did act, reporting to platform administrators is the most common course of action, official channels such as MCMC and the police are less widely utilised. Resolutions were often lacking or unclear, with abusers being blocked being the most common outcome.

Close to a third indicated that they did not need any support, with a sizable high share not knowing where to access support. Among those who sought help, younger adults leaned more on friends (women more than men) while older men turned to family members and NGOs/helplines. Older women were less inclined to turn towards friends and family, and many were unsure where to go. Awareness of formal services was low overall, though younger women displayed high awareness of knowing WCC as an official channel. Although older women noted that they knew of organisations and NGOs; they also misidentified the sources, and did not seem inclined to use those services.

The respondents displayed a strong willingness to support family members and friends if they had encountered online harassment, either by accompanying them to official authorities (more prominent among men of both age groups) or referring them to NGOs/helplines (more common among women of both age groups). Empathy was generally high, though a subset of younger men didn't think of it as their business.

## **8 Moving forward**

This report provides an empirical foundation for understanding the reality of online harassment across all segments of Penang's population. The data confirm that while online connections are nearly universal, the current mechanisms for prevention, support, and justice are fragmented, and sometimes inaccessible or unknown to survivors.

It is clear that this challenge is systemic and complex, and the inability to address this will affect digital participation overall. Therefore, the establishment of a taskforce on addressing online gender-based violence is necessary to effectively tackle this issue. The taskforce should include stakeholders from the government, civil society, academia as well as technology providers. A multi-stakeholder approach is required for systemic change.

The taskforce should aim to produce a comprehensive set of policy and operational recommendations. This commitment formalises a shared responsibility to safeguard digital spaces for all.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations are inherent to the study design and data collection methodology of this researcher project. Firstly, the cross-sectional design, while suitable for prevalence estimation, precludes the establishment of cause-and-effect relationships or the tracking of changes in online harassment prevalence over time. Secondly, despite the intent to employ SRS, the practical challenges of obtaining a complete and accurate sampling frame for the entire adult population of Penang are difficult to surmount. The reliance on an online platform (Zoho) for data collection further introduces potential sampling bias, as it excludes individuals without internet access or adequate digital literacy, suggesting that the findings may be more representative of the digitally-connected segment of Penang's population. Finally, the observed overrepresentation of youths in the sample also means that the overall prevalence rates were skewed towards the experiences of younger adults, affecting the generalizability to the entire above-18-years-old population of Penang.

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## Appendix A

Figure 1.0: Frequency of social media usage, ages 18 to 35 years

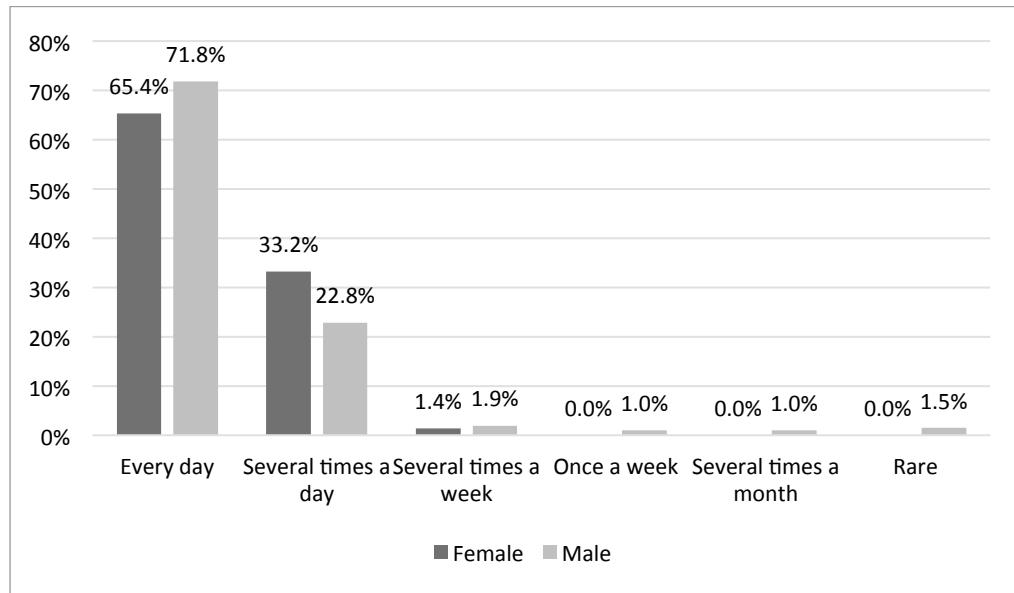


Figure 1.1: Frequency of social media usage, ages 36 and older

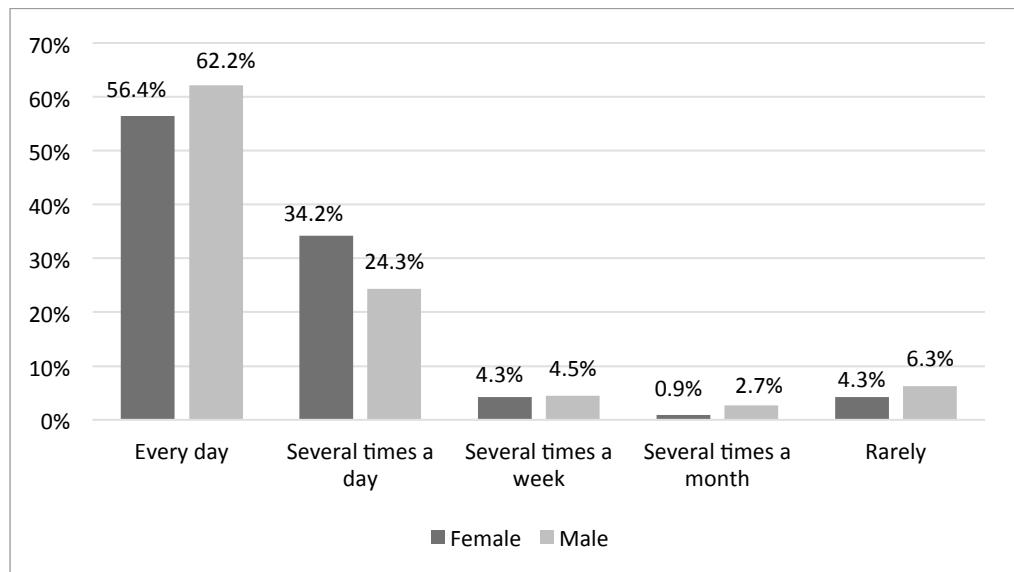


Figure 1.2: Harassment conducted upon others, ages 18 to 35 years

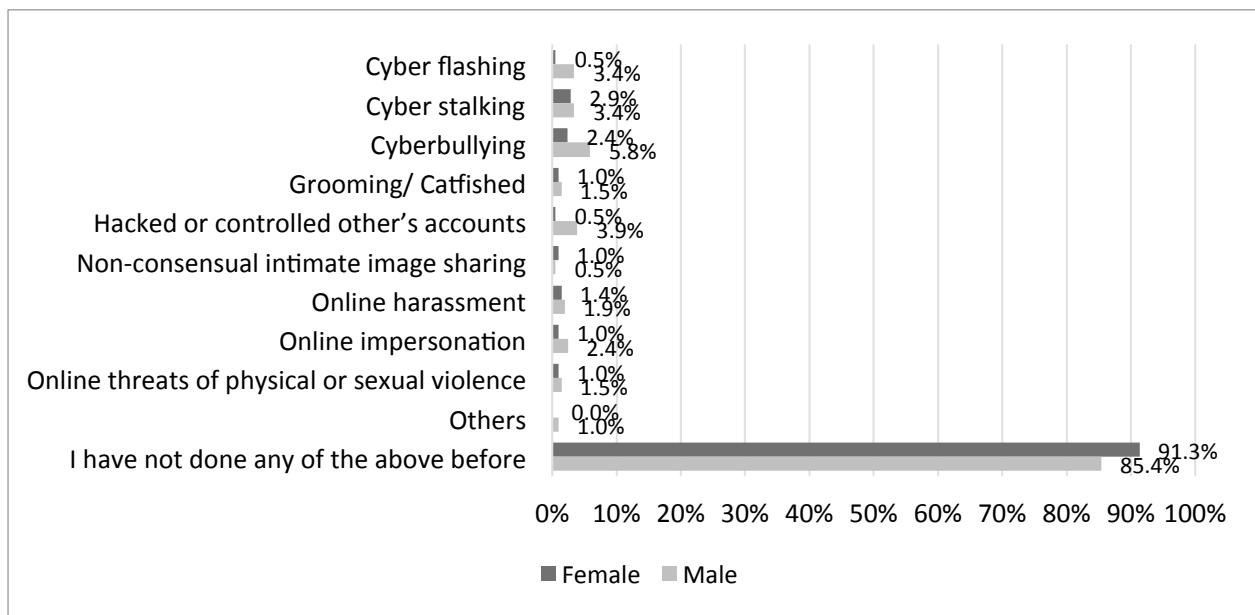


Figure 1.2: Harassment conducted upon others, ages 36 and older

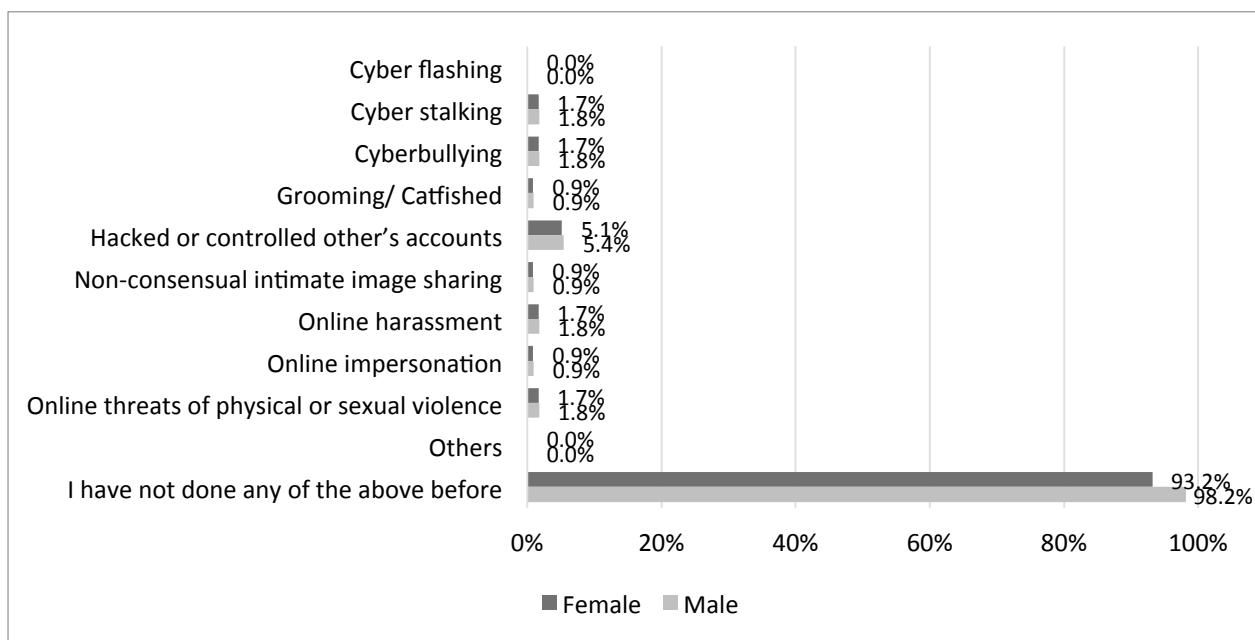


Figure 1.4 Types of harassment perpetrated, on ages 18 to 35 years

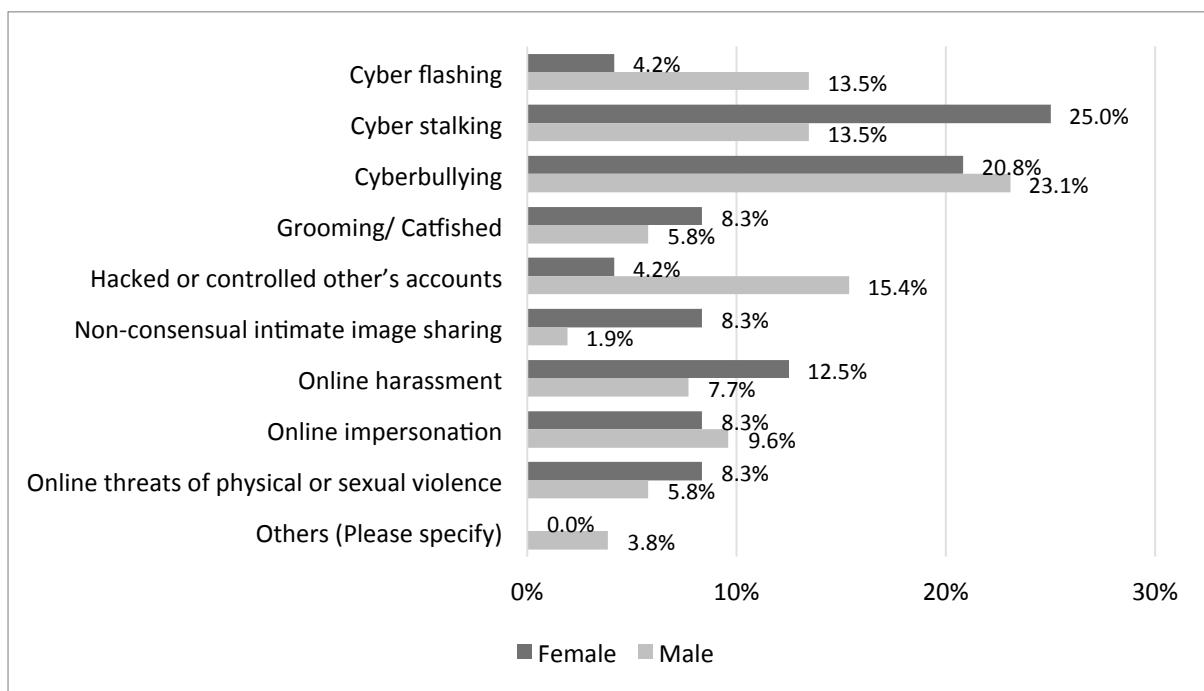


Figure 1.4 Types of harassment perpetrated, on ages 36 and older

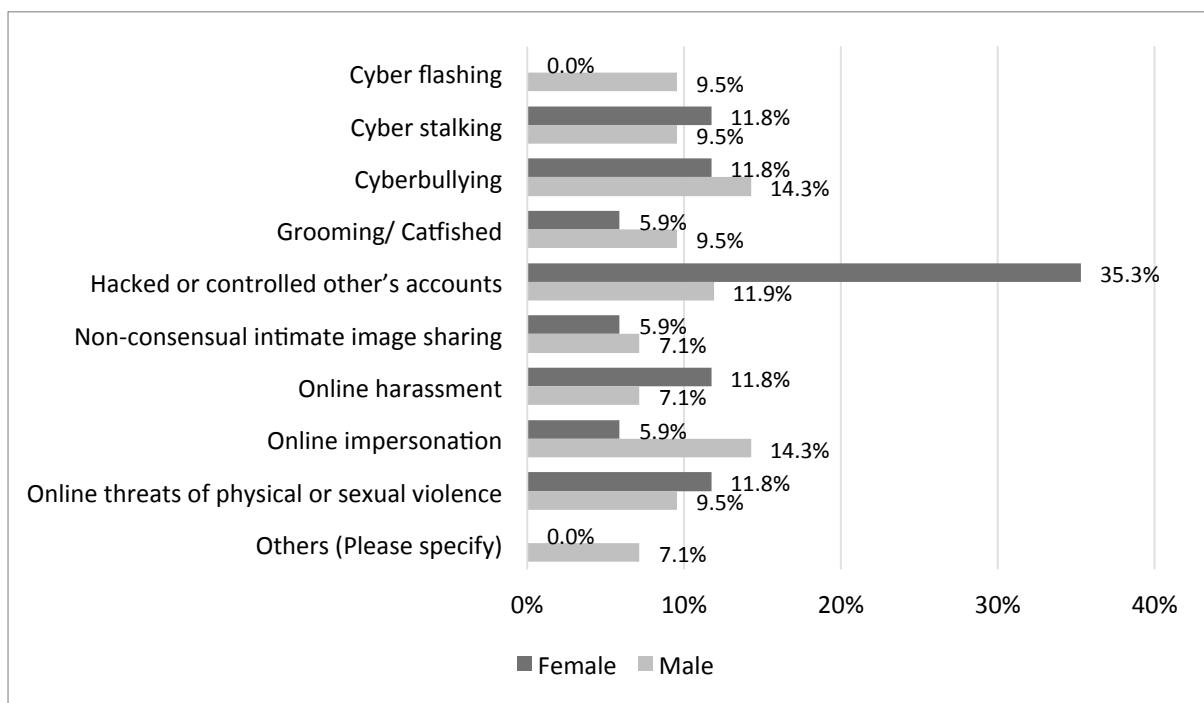


Figure 1.5 Awareness of NGOs/organisations that provide support, ages 18 to 35 years

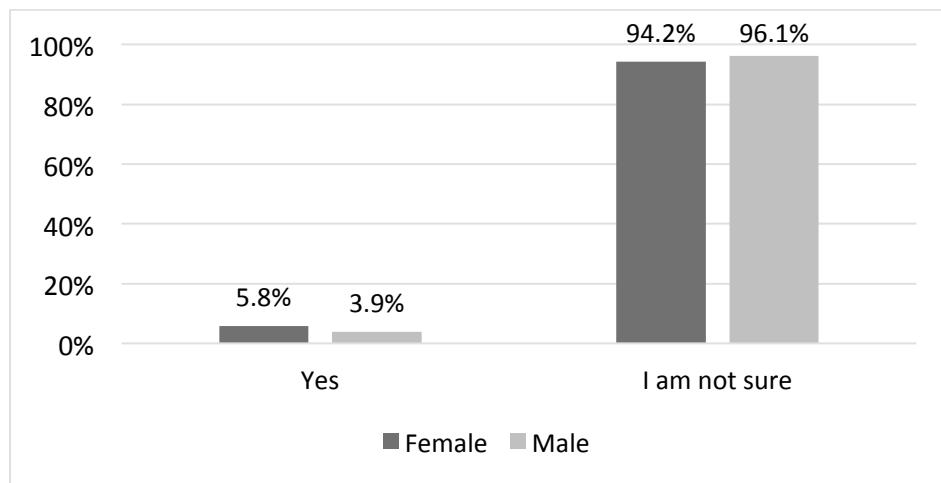


Figure 1.6 Awareness of NGOs/organisations that provide support, ages 36 and older

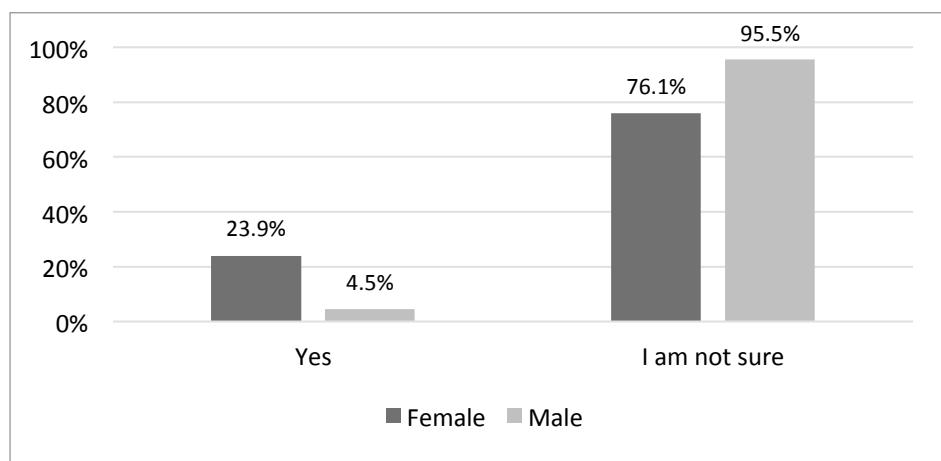


Figure 1.7 Organisations identified, ages 18 to 35 years

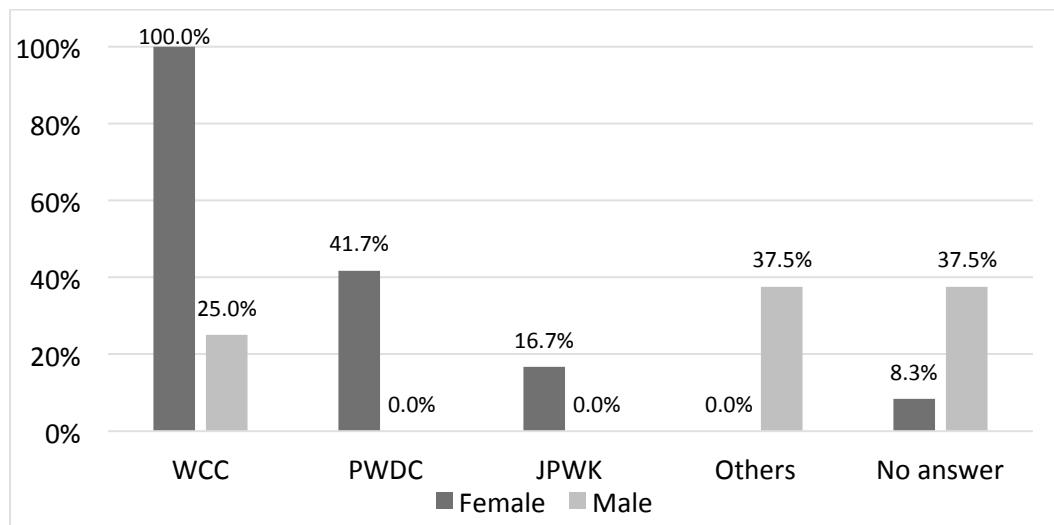


Figure 1.8 Organisations identified, ages 36 and older

